

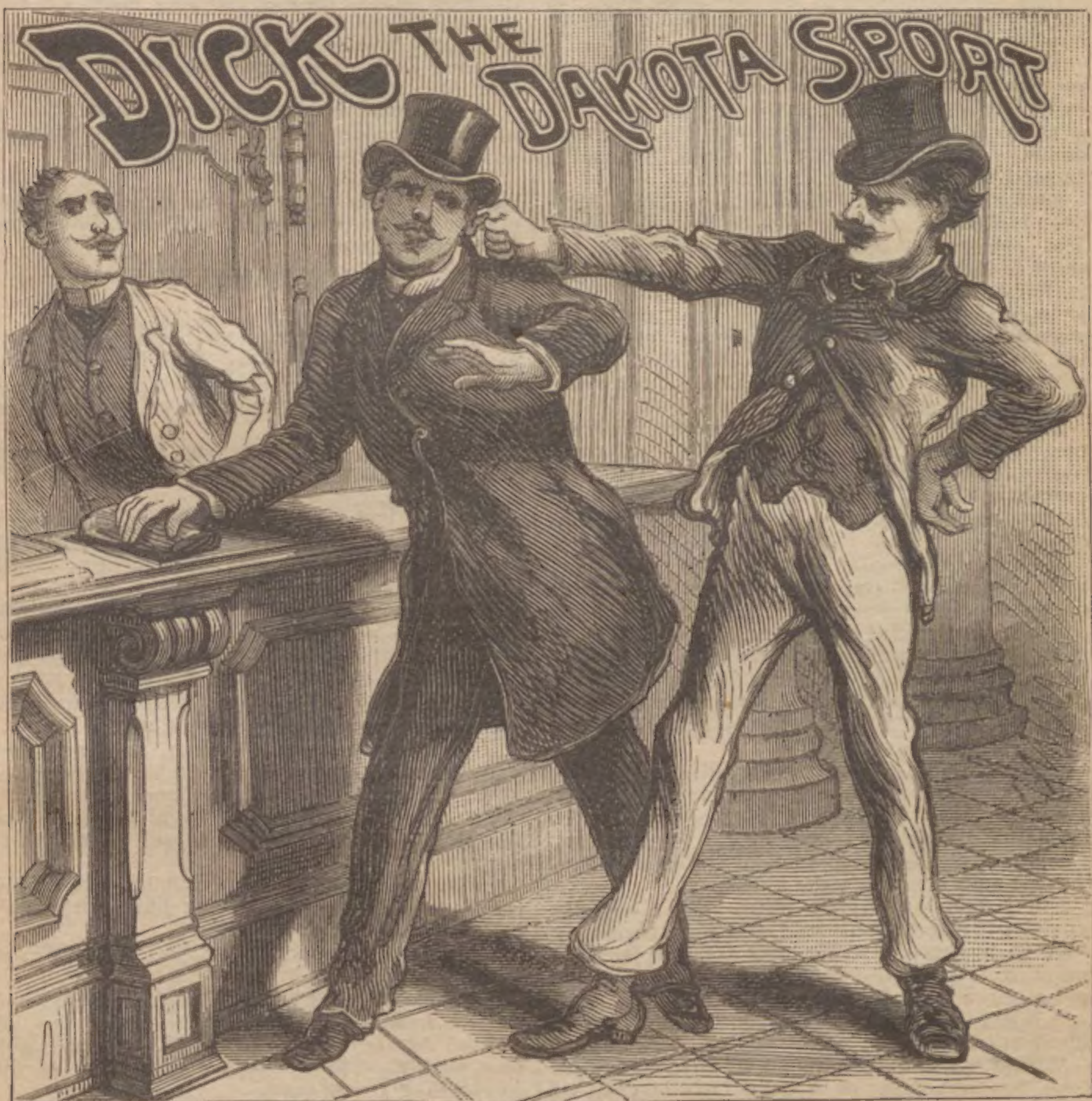
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No. 286. \$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 93 WILLIAM ST., NEW YORK.

Price, Vol. XXII.
Five Cents.



HE WAS TAKEN BY THE EAR WITH A PINCH SO HARD THAT IT BROUGHT TEARS TO HIS EYES.

Dick, the Dakota Sport ;

OR,

A Western Lad in the Quaker City.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "DAKOTA DICK IN CHICAGO," "THE MESSENGER BOY DETECTIVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A CAT IN A STRANGE GARRET.

"WELL, here I am. Never set foot on these streets before. Haven't a red, nor a crust in my pocket. Don't know a soul in this part of the world. But, no matter, I'll make my way. A fellow that's got plenty of float in him is sure to come to the top."

The individual who gave vent to this soliloquy presented a striking and curious figure. He was evidently quite a young man, perhaps not much over twenty-one years of age, and his chief evidence of manhood was a full black mustache, twisted into the fiercest French curl.

As for his attire, it looked as if it might have been picked up at some antediluvian Jew shop. The well-frayed coat was a handbreadth too short in the waist, and was buttoned so tightly in front, that it looked ready to split, like a locust's skin, down the back. His pantaloons were a full inch too short. His low-crowned silk hat, jabbed fiercely down on his head, had a narrow, well-curved rim, the fashion of ten years before.

Altogether, he presented an extraordinary appearance, which was added to by his swaggering gait, the independent manner in which he carried his head, and the belligerent swing which he gave the short stick which served him as a cane.

He looked complacently down at his muscular, well-knit and well-rounded frame, with an aspect of the utmost satisfaction.

A burly, dignified personage, who was hastily passing, somewhat rudely jostled the stranger as he was thus engaged in admiring self-observation. With a quick flash in his eyes, he turned upon the careless citizen, who had himself turned back with an angry stare.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," he remarked, with a polite nod. "I suppose that's your way here. Only out West we shake hands, instead of butting shoulders."

"One can't be on the lookout for every swag-gerer," answered the testy citizen.

"Oh! then you didn't mean it as a friendly greeting!" returned the odd stranger, carelessly tapping his knee with his stick. "If it isn't too much to ask, would you mind giving me the price of bricks and curbstone hereaway?"

"What in the world do you expect me to know about that?"

"Bless us! you don't mean to say you don't own this pavement; or a good two-thirds of it? I had a fancy you must be a heavy contractor in that line. Hope you have no objections to a

stranger walking on it, if he keeps close to the curb, and gives plenty of swing to your high mightiness?"

"You are an insolent ruffian!" retorted the citizen, in a rage. "Beware who you are talking to, sirrah, if you don't want to get yourself into trouble."

"I'm talking to the lord mayor, I suppose. Or some other high cockalorum. Here's my card."

"Fool!" muttered the citizen, though he could not help some change of countenance.

"Fool, sir? Fool to me? Fool to Dick, the Dakota Sport? Vamose now, instanter, before I bring that flashy tile down over your nose and eyes! Scoot, you prairie rabbit, while your bones are whole!"

The stranger whirled his stick in the air, and advanced with such a warlike gesture, that the citizen hastily turned and retreated, apparently thinking that prudence was, just then, the better part of valor.

A laugh broke over the handsome features of Dashing Dick, as he had called himself, on seeing this rapid retreat.

He resumed his independent walk with as much nonchalance as if this encounter was but an ordinary greeting to an acquaintance.

Meanwhile the discomfited citizen, having reached a safe distance, angrily observed the not very clean card which had been given him. On it was written:

"DICK DASHAWAY,

"Dakota."

"I knew it must be some border ruffian," he muttered angrily. "Very well, Richard Dashaway, Esq., it's your turn to-day, but I'll not forget you. I don't usually take without giving."

He carefully put away the stranger's card, and continued his walk, with a decidedly ruffled countenance.

Dick walked on, with all his reckless abandon. To all appearances he had quite forgotten the antagonist who was nursing up wrath against him.

The street upon which he was advancing was one not much frequented at that hour. Only an occasional person passed him. Just at this moment a well-dressed, portly gentleman, with a sturdy tread, and a highly self-important expression of countenance, came along.

He looked curiously at Dick, as if at a loss just what to make of him. Dick returned the look with all his easy independence.

"A solid old cove," he said to himself. "Wonder if there'd be any use trying to cultivate him?"

He was half-inclined to try his luck, but there was a sneer of disdain on the old gentleman's face that repelled him.

"Another lost opportunity," said Dick to himself.

He looked behind him, just in time to catch a similar look from the old gentleman, who had twisted his portly frame solidly around, and was gazing with a curious expression at the odd-looking young man.

But there was something else caught Dick's quick eyes. He sprung forward and picked up

an object which lay unobserved at the old gentleman's feet.

"Excuse me," said Dick politely, "but you have dropped your pocketbook. See if this doesn't belong to you."

A knowing nod of the head answered Dick's remark. His hand was put curtly aside by the fat paw of the portly citizen, upon whose face came a look of stern integrity, and self-satisfied shrewdness.

"It won't work, my friend," he pleasantly remarked. "It is a very neat trick, but you haven't picked out your man with much judgment. We have a fashion of reading the newspapers here, and know something about the tricks of your trade. You can't play the drop game on me."

There was nothing angry in his tone. In fact, he seemed rather in a good-humor at his own shrewdness.

A whistle of surprise and amazement came from Dick.

"It doesn't belong to you, then?" he asked.

"Now you'd best be off, while you're safe," answered the old gentleman severely. "If you stop here a minute longer I'll give you into the hands of the police."

"Thank you," replied Dick, taking off his hat very politely. "It is a very kind warning and I shall be glad to do as much for you some day. Will you be kind enough to tell me the name of these streets?"

"This is Eleventh. The street yonder is Jefferson."

"Much obliged. If you should want to see me on business at any time soon, say at this hour to-morrow, you might find me here. Give you very good-day."

Dick replaced his hat, setting it well back on his head, thrust the prize into his pocket, grasped the stick in his old warlike fashion, and walked away with his independent swing, without the slightest further attention to the astonished citizen.

The latter continued to look after him, with a very much puzzled expression. But a smile gradually broke over his broad countenance, and was followed by a chuckling laugh.

"Very cute. Very cute, indeed," he remarked, with a knowing nod. "It's astonishing how sharp some of these chaps are. There was only one little error in his calculations; he picked out the wrong man. John Blossom, Esq., has had his eye-teeth cut. He is not to be taken in by the drop game. I can't say that I did quite right. I ought to have seized the fellow and called for a policeman. But I must admit that the unblushing impudence of the rogue amused me. I flatter myself that I gave him a good scare, and he will hardly try the same game on any more of our citizens."

He continued to shake his head and chuckle to himself as he pursued his walk, evidently in high good-humor. There is something so pleasant in the thought that we, at least, are up to snuff, and too keen to be caught by roguish tricks.

Dick's face expressed equal satisfaction. He pressed his hand on the fat wallet in his breast pocket.

"Wonder if I'll see the old cove to-morrow?

Maybe he didn't drop it, but I've a notion he'll grin on the other side of his face before the day's over."

He cocked his hat well to one side, rubbed his right ear reflectively with the head of his stick, and fell into a train of deep cogitation.

"Seems to me an honest orphan ought to be encouraged. Ain't no use wasting honesty if it don't pay. It's the duty of the owner of the purse to offer a handsome reward, and it's my duty to accept it. That's good logic and reason. Let me see: what's a fair reward to encourage honesty in an orphan?" He continued to rub his ear reflectively. "Suppose we say a ten? Nobody can say a ten is extravagant. Guess we'll make it a ten, and invest it square off."

It was a clear train of reasoning, and the conclusion a very definite one. Dick took the thick leather wallet from his pocket, and opened it with very little show of curiosity. It was well filled, with a fat roll of notes. The first of these which he took hold of proved to be a ten-dollar bill. This he coolly took out, and returned the prize to his pocket.

"There, honesty is rewarded, and an orphan encouraged to do right. Guess now I'll go and have a snack."

Without troubling himself with the thought that another person might have some say about the amount of this reward, Dick entered the first eating-house that offered, and sturdily bade the waiter bring him a good dinner.

There were some smiling looks at the queer figure which the young man presented, but the amused persons seemed to think it good policy to turn their faces away when Dick faced them with his keen eyes, twisted the ends of his mustache into a fiercer curl, and laid his knobbed stick meaningly on the table.

"Roast beef—rare," he said to the waiter. "We cook it in the sun out West. Pickled clams; pig's toes; lobsters on toast. Just hurry along all the delicacies of the season. Quick as lightning, too. I've been starving for six days to get up an appetite for dinner, and if the dinner hangs fire, I'll eat the waiter. We Westerners ain't a bit particular."

The waiter bustled away a little nervously. There was something so fierce in his customer's tone, and so outlandish in his appearance, that it might not be too safe in his vicinity. He had heard something of there being cannibals out West.

Consequently Dick was soon provided with a good meal, in sufficient abundance to satisfy his cannibal appetite. But the nervous little attendant stood somewhat aside as his customer hungrily went to work, as if half-afraid that he might yet take a craving for a slice of rare-done waiter.

"Now shall I have anything more?" asked Dick, after a busy twenty minutes. "Yes. A toothpick. Here's your provender. Bring me the change."

He loftily handed out his ten-dollar bill, thrust the change into his pocket when brought to him, with a gratuity to the waiter; and stalked out of the saloon with an air as if he had come on to buy Philadelphia, and was undecided whether to purchase it in pieces or in a lump.

CHAPTER II.

THE FATE OF JOHN BLOSSOM'S PURSE.

ABOUT the time that Dick finished his meal, and sauntered forth, feeling very well satisfied with himself and the world which he honored with his presence, John Blossom, Esq., entered his Market street store. He wore a very placid countenance, which seemed strongly inclined to break out into smiles. One of the salesmen whispered to another as he passed:

"The old gentleman must have seen something funny on his way down-town. His face looks like the Schuylkill with a ripple on it."

"Had buckwheat cakes and honey for breakfast," replied the other. "There's nothing like that to smooth down the wrinkles in a man's temper."

Mr. Blossom walked on to his office, oblivious of these remarks. A gentleman awaited him there.

"Ah! glad to see you, Mr. Bently. You are early on hand this morning."

"I think not. Ten o'clock was the hour."

"Not past ten, is it? I was delayed a little on my way. Had the most extraordinary adventure. Take a seat, Bently, I must tell you about it."

He broke into a laugh at the recollection.

"Something amusing, eh?" asked Bently.

"Just the best joke I've had for a year. Ha! ha! ha! It was too good! Do I look like a raw countryman, Bently?"

"Not much," was the reply.

"I was taken for one, then. A chap tried to play the drop game on me. Ha! ha! It was the best joke of the season. A good-looking fellow enough, but dressed in Noah's old clothes. Picked up something at my feet. 'Did you drop this purse, sir?' It was a cute game, I promise you."

"Filled with bits of old newspaper, I suppose. Did you have him arrested?"

"No policeman about, as usual. I gave him some good advice. Scared him a little, I think. He will hardly try it on again in this city."

"But what was in the purse?"

"Bless you, man, you don't imagine I was green enough to touch it? No, no, as I said to the gentleman, I've had my eye-teeth cut. Oh, by the way, Bently, maybe you're in a hurry. Did you bring that note? I won't detain you."

"I have it here," answered Bently, producing a printed slip from his pocket.

"That's right. I came provided. Now I think of it, I might have passed the trick onto you, by taking the fellow's purse and paying you out of it. How would you like that, eh? Ha! ha! that would have been as good a joke as the other."

"Maybe I would have proved as sharp as you were."

"Oh! I'll give you sound cash. But it was good, Bently, wasn't it now? A prime joke." He was feeling in his pocket for his pocket-book. "To think that any one could look in my face and take me—for a—green—"

His voice sunk and his words became broken.

A remarkable change passed over his countenance. The smile upon his face slowly faded out. His jaw fell, and his eyes took on a glassy stare. He began to speak in a muttered tone.

"The best joke of the— By the Lord, Bently, it's no joke at all, and I'm the infernal donkey that was ever kicked for his stupidity! It was my own purse after all. There's a hole in my pocket you could drive a cab through. I was so confoundedly and ridiculously wide-awake that I am out of pocket to the tune of a cool thousand! I wish to Heaven there was some jackass here to kick me for my confounded dumbness! You do it, Bently, and I'll thank you for the service."

"If it is all the same to you I'd rather not play jackass," answered Bently dryly.

The old gentleman stamped around the office, and ran his fingers distractedly through his hair. He felt his pockets again and again.

"To think that he offered me the purse like a man, and I was so pig-headed that I would not take it! I don't suppose I will ever see him again."

"It was the best joke of the season, eh, friend Blossom?"

"If you say that again I'll knock you down!" exclaimed the merchant growing as red as a peony with rage. "Hang me if I don't! Just you keep this story to yourself. There's no use telling everybody what a fool I've been. Here, let me have the note. I was going to give you the cash on it, but you will have to take a check now."

He hustled his visitor out of the office as quickly as possible, with the closing remark:

"Mind now, Bently. If you love me don't let this out."

"It is too good a joke to keep," laughed Bently, as he walked away.

"He will have the story from end to end of the street in an hour," said the merchant disconsolately. "Let me see. The fellow said he would meet me to-morrow at the same hour. I shouldn't wonder if he was honest after all. Let me once get the cash back and they can laugh to their heart's content."

Meanwhile Dick Dashaway continued his aimless walk, his hands in his pockets, his stick under his arm, his hat thrust well back, and his face full of the independent spirit of the western wilds.

He was much stared at, but that very little troubled his equanimity. If Dick, with nothing in his pocket and an empty stomach, was not to be cast down, Dick with a good dinner and the remnant of a ten-dollar bill was as happy as a king.

Simple curiosity did not trouble him much.

"Folks can look if it's any good to them. I came by this rig honestly, and will swop even-up with anybody who don't like the fit. But I'd advise any gentleman not to try to make game of Dick Dashaway."

"A deuced sober concern, this Quaker City," he muttered, as he walked through the quiet streets. "Tain't got the go of Chicago, nary time. A chap could make a fortune there while he's turning a penny here. But there's another side to that picture. These sobersides hang on to their penny when they get it, while your smart Western nabob loses his fortune as quick as he made it. I know it, for I've been through that mill. No matter," he shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "I've made a fair beginning, anyhow. Hope to gra-

cious it wasn't the old chap's purse, and I'll fall heir to it. Hang me if I ain't getting curious to investigate the weight of my responsibility."

Looking around him for some shelter in which he might examine the contents of the purse which had so luckily fallen into his hands, he spied a quiet saloon that stood back in a small side-street. It seemed just the place for his purpose, and he made his way thither."

Entering with his usual easy swagger, he found himself curiously observed by several person, within the saloon, on some of whose faces there were covert smiles. Dick turned himself around as if for inspection.

"That's all there is of me," he remarked. "You've got me now, from my nose to my toes. A tight figure, ain't I, in a seedy suit! Laugh it out, if there's anything to laugh at. But don't crowd on the mourners. I'm a baby from Dakota, and we Dakota infants don't like too much pap. Just smoke that, gentlemen."

He turned curtly to the bar, where the red-headed bartender hastily smothered a snicker, and tried to look grave.

"A brimmer of ale and a pipe, my covey, and be brisk about it if you want to save your scalp. Brick-dust scalps are at a premium just now, and yours looks tempting. Show me to a private room. I don't think I care for any better company than myself."

An angry look came into the face of the incensed bartender. He was about giving his rude customer as rude a reply, but Dick curtly cut him short.

"There, that will do. Just imagine it said: I'm an impudent beggar and scarecrow, that ought to be kicked for my impertinence. It's all stereotyped, my friend. They've got it in print out West; so you needn't think you're going to say anything original. Just show me a room, and hurry up my pipe and ale, and then you can have your private theatricals. I know just the sort of a rooster I am, so you needn't take the trouble to tell me."

The angry bartender choked back his intended remarks. Dick had quite taken the wind out of his sails. He proceeded to sullenly obey the orders of his queer customer, while Dick turned coolly to the other tenants of the room, who were laughing at his odd behavior.

"We fricassee that sort of chaps out West," he said, with an unchanged face. "Don't know how you serve them up here. I'm just learning the ways of your village."

He turned on his heel and followed the waiter, who now led the way to the private room which Dick had ordered. He passed through a narrow apartment behind the bar, and into a small, closet-like room adjoining.

"That will serve," said Dick, looking around him. "A table and a chair, and a chance to stretch my heels and for the smoke of a pipe to curl in. That ought to serve anybody that ain't hoggish. See here, Bricktop, I hope I haven't hurt your feelings by my off-handed ways. I can't help it. It just comes out of me like juice out of a watermelon. Here's something to cool your sores."

He thrust a half-dollar into the waiter's hand, who went out smiling, quite won over by Dick's shining argument.

"I know the tribe," he remarked. "You can buy the dearest of them with a dollar. Now let's see what I've tumbled on."

He took a long draught of the foaming ale, lit his pipe and sent a curl of smoke toward the ceiling, and then extracted the wallet from his pocket.

It was a fat leathern book, apparently well-stuffed with valuables. Dick soon had on the table a thick roll of notes. These he flattened out and commenced to count.

"Tens, twenties, and there's a hundred. The old chap don't deal in picayune papers, that's sure. It's queer what a deuce of a difference it makes to put another cipher at the end of a ten! There's a cool thousand and the tale not told yet. Eleven hundred and sixty! Why, it's tempting Providence. The old cove took leave of his wits when he put such a lining as this into a rotten pocket. Lucky for him I'm an honest coon."

He took another long sip at his ale, threw himself back in his chair, and smoked away as if quite exhausted with his labors.

"Always tumble on my feet somehow," he cogitated. "I was too confounded modest to take a ten for my reward. Hang it, he can't offer less than that odd sixty. The old fool is swimming in cash, and ought to be bled for the benefit of poor orphans like me."

He opened the book again and examined the papers which it yet contained. These were mostly letters, memoranda, canceled notes, and the other odds and ends that some people crowd into their pockets.

Dick curiously examined several of them, while an odd look came upon his expressive features.

"John Blossom, eh? Wholesale groceries. 789 Market street. Mighty good. But there's something else than tea and pickles in your business, old hoss. A sweet old Blossom you are. A regular rosebud, if I ain't out of my reckoning. But that's none of my business."

The smoke of his pipe curled in slow wreaths upward as Dick sunk into deep cogitations. There was evidently something working in his busy brain.

He slowly replaced the papers and money in the wallet. As he did so he was attracted by some voices in the adjoining room. The door was slightly ajar, so that an occasional word came to his ears.

"Sounds as if those chaps were a bit boozy," he remarked. "If they want to talk on private matters, they oughtn't to prime themselves with whisky first— Eh! what's that? Blossom? Seems to me I've very lately become acquainted with that name."

Dick's interest was aroused. The name that came to him was that of the owner of the lost wallet. He rose and cautiously advanced to the door, where, without any scruples of conscience, he set himself to listen.

"Got my fortune to make," he muttered. "If there's chances afloat in the wind, I'd be a fool not to grab for them."

The half-tipsy individuals to whom he was listening took little trouble to lower their tones.

"I tell you he's under my thumb," declared one. "He daren't squirm. Why, I could smash

him as easy as I could a blue-bottle fly, and he knows it."

"You ain't going to let the chance slip you?"

"Not much I ain't," came with a sneering laugh.

"He's well lined, I'm told."

"I should fancy so. Blossom's groceries are known from Maine to Texas. What's more, the daughter's as pretty as a picture. I'm bound to have the girl."

"Go in, Hiram. I'll back you to the shoulders. You want my help in this, or you wouldn't be so dashed confidential. What is it? Let's hear my part in the game."

Their voices sunk so that only an occasional word came to Dick's ears. He returned to his seat, satisfied that there was nothing more to be heard. In doing so he unintentionally gave the table a tilt. Instantly he heard the men in the next room spring up with angry haste. The door leading into his apartment was flung open, and the faces of his neighbors appeared, flushed with anger and dread of having been overheard.

They were young men, somewhat flashily dressed, and not ill-looking, though it needed no keen eye to detect traces of dissipation in their faces.

"By the Lord Harry!" cried the foremost. But he checked himself, and looked with astonishment at the occupant of the room they had invaded.

Dick had his heels on the table, his chair tilted well back, and his sorry tile set at a sloping angle on his head. He held his pipe in one hand and looked with an easy nonchalance at his unceremonious visitors.

"I'm mighty glad to see you, gentlemen," he coolly remarked. "Only the next time you're shot out of a cannon I wish you'd aim in some other direction. It isn't good for the nerves of a quiet single gentleman to have a pair of jolly bucks like you flung at him like a potato into an Irishman's throat."

CHAPTER III.

HOW DICK CHANGED HIS CLOTHES.

THE leader of the two men who had invaded Dick's apartment was a handsome fellow, with sharp black eyes, and a long, drooping mustache. He looked like a genuine man-about-town, a nobby-dressed, easy-going individual, who might have been either a bank clerk or a professional gambler.

His companion was also well, but rather loudly dressed. There was in his face something of a hang-dog expression. They had both evidently been drinking, and were flushed with liquor and anger alike. Dick looked them over with eyes accustomed to take in the caliber of such men at a glance.

"See here, my fine buck," cried the first, the one called Hiram by his companion, "I've a notion you've been playing spy on us. I know you had your ears at the keyhole. If you've been playing that trick on me, I'm going to cure you of trying it again."

He advanced with a belligerent aspect. Dick did not stir, but quietly removed the pipe from his mouth.

"So you were having a private conversation in that room?" he coolly queried.

"You bet we were."

"And saying something you were ashamed to have honest folks hear?"

Hiram was somewhat taken aback by this cool question. He had no answer to make.

"See here, my good fellow," continued Dick, with his easy air, "the next time you've got any secrets to tell, just you take a speaking-trumpet and roar them out in the open street. Of course nobody will listen. Folks always stuff cotton in their ears when chaps like you want to air their secrets."

Hiram cast a supercilious glance at the odd attire of the speaker.

"You've been listening, then, blast you, you walking advertisement of a South street Jew store? You've overheard our conversation?"

"Not quite all," answered Dick coolly, "but the most of it. Didn't have any cotton handy to stuff in my ears."

"You impertinent beggar! Hang me if I don't lay you out!"

Hiram hustled angrily up, with clinched fists. He was closely followed by his tipsy companion. It looked as if Dick was going to have his hands full, with a pair of rough customers.

But our Western friend had no idea of being taken at a disadvantage. In an instant his feet were on the floor, and he had risen from his seat, so as to confront his antagonists.

The tipsy sports rushed on Dick like a pair of maddened bulls. But they counted without their host if they thought to take that young gentleman at a disadvantage. Hiram's companion was slightly in advance, and dealt a sledge-hammer blow at Dick. But very much to his surprise, he found himself the next minute curled up in a heap against the wall, with a ringing in his head as if a hive of bees had swarmed in his brains.

"It isn't my fault, gentlemen," said Dick, politely, "if the walls are too close together in this room. I wasn't consulted by the architect."

At the same moment the door leading to the bar-room opened, and its occupants came streaming into the apartment, attracted by the noise of the fight.

"What the deuce is the row here?" demanded the saloon-keeper, who was among these newcomers. "Are you gentlemen kicking up a shindy?"

"I'd advise you not to keep open house for tramps and black-legs," cried Hiram, scornfully. "If you expect gentlemen to patronize your house you had better give a cool good-by to chaps like that, who has robbed some scarecrow of his best clothes."

He laughed sneeringly as he pointed at Dick. The landlord looked at his odd customer, who stood in an easy attitude, surveying the company.

"Well, I'll swear if you ain't a sweet figure for a respectable house!" he ejaculated. "Hang your impudence, what brings you here? This is not an asylum for tramps. You get, instant, before I show you the way to the street."

"All right, Boniface," answered Dick, with easy impertinence. "It is hardly the place for gentlemen in a house patronized by sponging roughs, like these half-fledged roosters. I've

got about enough of your crib. Don't care to be robbed by blackguards."

"Rob you!" yelled Hiram, in a fury. "I'd make more by robbing a dead tramp. Rob you, you scaly beat! I bet if you were hung up by the heels we couldn't shake the price of a beer out of you. Look at him, gentlemen. Look at that rig. A gay set-up for millionaires, isn't it?"

"This circus isn't on exhibition just now, so the gentlemen needn't trouble themselves to look," answered Dick, in his easy manner. "As for you two chaps, I've salted you once, and am ready to repeat the dose if you want it. If it comes to a question of cash I'm your horse. I'll match you dollar for dollar, the winner to take the pile. And as you seem to admire my suit of clothes, it shall be rig against rig. Come, my jolly cove, the fat pocketbook strips the lean one, if you dare stand the match."

A laugh of approbation broke from all present at this bold challenge.

Hiram stood for a moment cogitating, as if in doubt.

"Come, Mr. Boomer," said the landlord, with a laugh. "It is a square challenge. And I fancy you ought to be able to wipe out our friend here."

"It's a bargain," exclaimed Hiram, with a look at his competitor as if he did not fear much grist from that mill. "And understand me, my hearty, if I win you shall strip, if you have to go out bare legged. Is that the understanding, gentlemen?"

"Yes, yes," came the reply, with a shout of laughter. "We will hold him to his bargain."

"We Dakota boys never flinch from our bargains," Dick coolly replied. "Come, boss, plank down. Let's see the weight of your pony."

With a confident air Hiram extracted a well-filled purse from his pocket and took out a ten-dollar bill.

"I fancy that will be enough to discount our friend's pile," he remarked, as he slammed it down on the table.

"Not much," answered Dick. "You'll have to put in bigger licks than that."

All present opened their eyes in wonder as he drew from an inner pocket Mr. Blossom's fat wallet. Extracting from it a loose twenty dollar bill, Dick laid it on the table and looked inquiringly at his opponent.

"You can't dry me up with Western bluster," exclaimed Hiram, angrily. "Here's for you. Match it if you dare."

He emptied his pocketbook on the table, and counted out its contents. Five hundred dollars lay on the table before him. He looked up with a smile of contempt, as if satisfied that his opponent was checkmated.

"Is that your pile?" asked Dick.

"Yes," answered Hiram, in a tone of some doubt. Dick did not show the expected signs of melting down.

"Then I wipe it in."

He laid five one-hundred-dollar bills by the side of the twenty.

"Make it or flunk." He looked with quiet meaning at his discomfited foe.

"There's some rascally trick here!" cried

Hiram, with a pale, excited face. "The man never came by that money honestly. It's a gambler's trick, gentlemen."

"That's one of our little western ways," explained Dick. He gathered up the winnings and thrust them into his pocket. "Cash and clothes was the bet. Was it not, gentlemen?"

"Yes," came the general reply.

"Then peel," demanded Dick, seating himself on the table. "Strip, you blusterer! Off with that gay rig, or I'll shoot you as I would a cattle-lifter."

Hiram, pale and trembling looked again at his determined antagonist. He then looked around at his friends, but saw no signs of their coming to his aid. He slowly began to remove his clothes.

Dick coolly waited, one leg over the table, while the performance went on.

"Lay the dry goods there," he remarked, pointing to the end of the table.

Soon his baffled and dismayed opponent was stripped to his underclothing. A smile of amusement curled Dick's handsome lips.

"That will do," he said. "You needn't peel to the skin. And as I don't want to send you into the street in that rig I'll trade with you. It's the rule all the world over that a fair trade is no robbery."

Dick quickly removed his own clothing and assumed the attire of his antagonist, taking good care to transfer his cash.

"There, my jolly lad, you can pile on that antediluvian rig as soon as you like," he remarked, straightening himself in his new clothes, which fitted him almost as if made for him.

He had changed from an odd-looking and seedy customer of a few minutes before into a handsome, stylish and well-dressed gentleman.

"Wear that scarecrow's dress!" cried Hiram angrily. "I'll die first!"

"All correct," answered Dick, with an ironical smile. "You can dig out as you are if you prefer. Day, day, gentlemen. If you know any more sports that want to salt a western greeny just fetch him around. I'm always open for a bit of game."

Playing significantly with the lock of his revolver, he walked to the bar-room door, and vanished with a parting bow.

CHAPTER X.

ASTONISHING THE NATIVES.

A LAUGH of amusement broke from Dick as he made his way along the street. He looked down at himself with an immense degree of satisfaction. In his new dress he appeared a handsome young gentleman of taste and style, though a little loud.

"There's a leg for you," he ejaculated. "And a shoulder that fits any coat. The ladies smile at me in another shape now, you bet. Don't I always drop down into luck though? Not a day in this town, and a five hundred strike already; without saying anything of John Blossom's little pile. It's better to be born lucky than rich any day."

He walked on with his easy swagger, not noticing that he was followed at a distance by Hiram Boomer's companion. It might, indeed, have been a sorry day for that young man had

Dick discovered that he was being tracked by a spy.

"Guess I'll streak for the Continental. Nobby gents or none for Dashing Dick. But wouldn't I give a cow and a calf to see friend Hiram peg out in that old raffle suit of mine!" He laughed gayly at the thought. "He won't, though, or not till after dark. I suppose he'll be putting that rig in a glass case in the museum of antiquities."

Dick reached Chestnut street, and made his way to the Continental Hotel, without noticing the spy upon his track. The latter followed him into the hotel, and watched him as he signed the register and ordered a room. He also noticed, with a look of anything but satisfaction, that Dick handed his fat wallet to the clerk for safe-keeping.

"Hang his dirty caution," growled the spy. "He's going to have his swing out of Hiram's cash, and bank the other. That balks part of our little game. A fellow might think the chap smelt a rat."

Dashing Dick, quite oblivious of the fact that he was the center of such an interested observation, was impressing his opinions on the hotel clerk.

"Not the tenth story, if you please," he remarked with great politeness. "I've given up mountain climbing since I came East. Box me in some neat little crib, not up more than one or two stairs. I didn't come here to see the sun rise over the city."

"I can give you a second-floor room. But you will have to pay for it," said the clerk, slightly miffed by Dick's off-hand ways.

"Don't you suppose I know enough about hotels to know that?" was the reply. "If I bunked on a clothes line and took my meals off a chair bottom, I'd have to pay for it. I've got the needful, old hoss. And as you're bound to bleed me anyhow, I might as well die for a sheep as a goat. You lay down heavy on that pocketbook I gave you. If it's lost I'll take the hotel to pay for it. Where's the black-complexioned individual that's to tote me to my room? Trot him out."

The clerk, a little out of temper, signaled a waiter, and handed Dick over to him, well-pleased to get rid of his queer customer.

"There, that will do," said Dick, after being brushed from top to toe by the obsequious waiter. "Or hold up, my friedd. Got a silk handkerchief?"

"Yes, sah," answered the attendant.

"There's a speck of dust on the end of my nose. Just tip it off, will you? There, now I begin to feel clean. What's the damage?"

"Sah?" exclaimed the surprised waiter. "Nothin', sah. We makes no charge for brushin' gemmen, sah."

"Oh, you don't, hey? You just hustle that broom around for a bit of sport? All right, Sambo. I won't force any dirty cash on your honest soul. Wouldn't insult you by it. You can git, now. Don't want you any longer."

With a downcast and angry countenance, the waiter slid through the door. He had not made ten steps, however, before Dick called him back.

"How soon will supper be ready, Sambo?"

"In half an hour, sah."

"Then toddle back here about that time, and pilot me down. I haven't got the hang of this cross-twisted concern yet. And say, Sambo, here's the price of a sugar plum that's burning my vest-pocket. Suppose you take care of it till I ask you for it again. That won't insult your dignity, eh?"

The waiter grinned with delight as he fingered the coin. He retired with profuse bows and thanks.

"Cheap as dirt, blacky. I could buy your soul with a trade dollar," soliloquized Dick. "Shoot me, if this isn't a neat get-up, though," he continued, as he looked around the roomy and handsomely furnished apartment. "That clerk's going for me early in the morning. But who'd have thought that seedy Dick Dashaway, when he tramped into the Quaker City not ten hours ago, as hungry as sin, and with an empty pocket, would be ordering the best room in a gallus hotel before night? Dunno how it is, but I always tumble on my feet."

A half-hour afterward found Dick at the supper-table, doing justice to an abundant meal. His day's adventures had given him a hearty appetite, to which a full pocket and an easy heart added their share.

"Feel as if I'd been climbing the Rockies," he said, as he lingered over his supper. "Or as if I'd been corraling a drove of wild oxen. What do you call that, Pompey?" as the waiter brought him a diminutive sample of meat.

"Steak, sah. Br'iled steak, rare."

"Oh, it is! Can I take your word for it, or had I better send for a microscope? Looks like a fricasseed grasshopper."

"Br'iled steak, sah," repeated the offended waiter.

"Sure of that? All right, then. Take out this sample and tell them that's what I want. You needn't fetch it in mouthfuls, like this. I can do my own carving. Just put on the side of a cow. Vamose, now. What are you hanging fire about?"

The hesitating waiter snatched up the plate and left in a miff, to relate in the kitchen that they had a cannibal at the supper-table.

But Dick, caring not a fig for the sensation he was creating, continued his supper in the same style.

"There!" he exclaimed at length, "I've done two men's duty. Guess I'd best evacuate while there's something left in the hotel for breakfast. Haven't had a square, solid meal for a week before."

He strolled easily into the main room of the hotel, as big in his boots as any millionaire there, and bigger in his heart than half of them, a true specimen of western dash and pluck, not caring a cent for to-morrow so to-day did its duty.

Dick had not finished his after-supper cigar, when the spy again glided cautiously into the hotel, with eager, peering eyes. His face lit up with satisfaction on observing the object of his espionage, then engaged in conversation with one of the hotel guests.

Eight o'clock had struck from a neighboring clock, when Dick strolled out into Chestnut street for a promenade before bedtime. The

avenue was brilliant with lights and thronged with people. He walked on for a considerable distance, enjoying the soft air of the evening. The spy followed him, step by step.

He had reached the end of his walk and was turning to go back, when he was approached by a small boy, with a very sharp face.

"Excuse me, gentleman," said the boy, with a forced whine in his voice. "But would you mind coming down here a little way? There's a lady has fell and hurt herself. I've been trying to help her, but I ain't strong enough."

Dick looked down at the mite, without distrust in his eyes.

"A lady, eh? Fell and hurt herself? Well, I'd be a hog if I didn't. And I ain't no hog, nary time. Chip along, my hearty. I'm after you."

The spy noticed with a look of satisfaction that Dick started off with the diminutive messenger.

"He bites. I thought that would fetch him," was his remark. "Now for the rest of the game." He hastened onward.

Dick walked easily on, questioning the boy, and not noticing that the keen lad was leading him a considerable distance.

"Here's the place," said the boy at length, stopping before a quiet house in a side street, whose door he pushed open.

"This is the place, eh? Then where's the woman?"

"She's inside, sir. Come right in."

"Look here, young hoptoad. Didn't you say that a woman had fallen in the street and hurt herself, and that she wanted to be helped home?"

"No, sir," cried the boy, eagerly, "I didn't say a word about the street. It was in the house she fell, sir. Down the stairs. She's laying there yet. Oh, come in, sir! You don't know how she's hurt."

"I know that this is a confounded doubtful yarn," answered Dick, keenly observing the house. "Where are the folks of this respectable mansion, boy?"

"They are all away on a picnic. They hain't come home yet. I was sent out to look for somebody. Oh, do come in, sir, and help the poor woman!"

"It looks thunderingly as if there was a nigger in the woodpile," considered Dick. "I wonder if there's an adventure ahead of me? Anyhow Dashing Dick is not the chap to back down before a bit of sport. Might as well finish the day out. Peg ahead, my little coon. I'll see what's in the wind."

The boy led up a flight of stairs. He halted at the foot of the second flight.

"It was here I left her," he said, in a tone of surprise. "She must have got up and gone into this room."

He opened the door of a side room. It was totally dark within. Dick stood hesitatingly in the doorway, trying to make out the vague outlines of the apartment before him.

"There's some thin game here," he muttered, as he drew a match from his pocket and struck it on the door-jamb.

As he did so a dark form leaped from a shadowy corner of the hall. It was the spy,

who had concealed himself there. Giving Dick a hard shove, he sent him reeling to the middle of the room, while, at the same instant, the door closed sharply behind him, and the lock resounded with a loud click.

Dick's match flashed for a moment, and then went out; but not before it had revealed a perilous and startling scene.

CHAPTER V.

RATTLING THE IVORIES.

THE light of the match illuminated the room but for an instant, and then left all again in total darkness. But that instant was enough to put Dick in full possession of the situation. For it had revealed to his eyes a room with a table in its center, and around its sides a group of stern-faced men, each holding a pistol with its muzzle bearing full upon his head. He saw at a glance that he had been trapped into a den of villains, and that he was decidedly in for it. But Dashing Dick of Dakota was not the man to be put down by any such trifle as that.

"I cave," he cried. "I fling up the sponge. You needn't pull trigger on any of those little playthings. I know just how they work, so you needn't trouble yourselves to show me. But suppose some of you gentlemen strike a light. I was always afraid of ghosts in the dark."

"You have had your fun, Dashing Dick, as you call yourself," came a voice from the darkness. "It is our turn now."

"All right, boss. Wheel in the circus—camels, elephants, and all the animales. Fetch along your lofty tumblers and your comical clowns. I'm ready for the performance."

A smothered laugh from one of his captors followed Dick's reckless gayety. A match was struck and a lamp lit, which flung its light through the room. He looked curiously around to see what sort of company he had fallen into.

A glance revealed the situation and told him the whole reason of the trap that had been laid for him. For there stood his late opponent, Hiram Boomer, dressed in Dick's discarded suit, and making a most ridiculous appearance therein. Dick could not help laughing at the aspect of his sorrily-dressed victim.

"Excuse me," he said, "but you do look confoundedly seedy and old-fashioned. Wonder if I cut such a figure when I masqueraded in that tasty rig. You ought to put yourself up at auction and sell out to the lowest bidder.—So these are your friends, eh? Invited them around to give me a sort of surprise party, did you? Hang me, if it wasn't kind in you. I won't easy forget the favor."

The group of men who were stationed around the walls of the room lowered their weapons with a feeling of shame, as they saw their unarmed prisoner standing so unconcerned in their midst.

"You played sharp on me, Dashing Dick," said Hiram, severely, as he advanced to the table. "You robbed me like a dead beat as you are. It's my turn now, and I'm bound to get even with you. I wore this tramp's suit with a purpose."

"Just so," remarked Dick, coolly. "I understand. You wanted to see how a tailor's sponge

would look in a gentleman's cast-off clothes. Now, see here, Hiram, what's your little game? I've got business on hand, and though your invitation is very pressing—"

"Duced pressing!" growled one of the ruffians, while another laughed.

"These are only some friends of mine, that I invited around to see fair play," answered Hiram, with an effort to emulate Dick's coolness. "I only want to finish our little game of match, that's all. In the first place, there's a document in that suit that wasn't in our bargain. It was clothes, not papers. So hand it over."

"Haven't investigated the pockets yet," rejoined Dick, noticing a shade of anxiety in Hiram's voice. "Lord love you, man, you're welcome to all your papers. I don't want them."

He at once felt the pockets of his newly-won suit, and drew from one of them a folded-paper.

"Is this the document?"

"Yes," cried Hiram, with an air of great satisfaction, as he seized the paper from Dick's extended hand, and thrust it deep into a pocket of the suit he wore.

"So far so good," remarked Dick. "Any more business on hand?"

"Yes. A little game of match."

He produced a dice-box, which he laid upon the table. "You have in your pocket a purse of five hundred dollars which you won from me. Now I want my revenge. We'll rattle the bones for that little stake, if you please."

"I'm agreeable," answered Dick cheerily. "You never caught me yet going back on a square game."

"Call your bet. The best throw from double ace to double six. What will you have, the high or the low?"

"High, for a bee-hive," cried Dick. "There's nothing low about me."

"The stake is mine," said Hiram, laying his hand on the purse.

"Solid logic," answered Dick. "No going back on the bones. Rake in the stakes."

"Come," continued Hiram, "you can have your revenge. This is to be a square game."

"Haven't another red about me," rejoined Dick.

"But you have a receipt from the clerk of the Continental for a valuable wallet in his safe. I'll take that interesting paper on a bet against this purse."

"Oho! is that your little game?"

"Just so," answered Hiram, curling his mustache, as he looked triumphantly at his helpless victim. "It's only a bit of paper; but I've taken a fancy to it."

"Oh, you have? Then don't let me stand in the way of your fancies. I'm the most accommodating cown out. Here's your little paper that you've taken such a fancy to."

He laid the receipt upon the table.

"Now pass over the box," he said. "I'll do my own throwing this time. Don't like to trouble you to handle the ivories for me."

The observers looked curiously on as Dick gave the box a western rattle and brought it heavily down upon the table.

"Deuce ace! Sold, as sure as shooting," he cried,

"I reckon so, if that's your best throw," answered Hiram, as he tossed a pair of sixes from the box.

"Rake it down," said Dick. "You've got the winning fever to-night. You've cleaned me out like a whistle."

"Not quite," answered Hiram, coolly. "One more throw, my dear sir, for rig and jig. I don't want to be hard on you, but I've taken a fancy to that very neat suit you wear. And I've a notion these clothes of mine will fit you to a charm."

Dick cast a side glance at the scaly figure which Hiram presented and broke into an involuntary laugh.

"Hang me, Hiram, you'd burst a looking-glass if you looked into one now. Did Dick of Dakota ever cut such a dash as that? No matter, old chap, if it's to be a toss of the bones, I'm your man. I never backed yet from a square wager."

A laugh, which was not much to Hiram's relish, broke from all present at Dick's comical manner. But he could afford to let his victim joke, on the principle of "Let those laugh who win."

The bones were certainly against him. Again Hiram threw twelve to Dick's five. But the shrewd Westerner was not green enough to impute this run of ill-luck to fortune. He had noticed some manipulations of Hiram's fingers. He picked up the dice and balanced them curiously on his finger-tip.

"I thought so. Loaded!" he said. "I suppose we've got to reverse our afternoon's game, and strip back again."

"It looks that way," rejoined Hiram dryly.

Without a moment's hesitation Dick began to take off his borrowed plumage. He knew well that they were playing with him, like a cat with a mouse, and he would have sold his head before showing the white feather.

In a few minutes the exchange was made, and Dick again appeared in the sorry attire which he had worn that morning into the city, while Hiram assumed with infinite satisfaction his own more sightly array.

Meanwhile Hiram took possession of his recovered purse, and of Dick's hotel-safe receipt.

"Now, my jolly Westerner," he remarked, with a knowing look, "I don't mind telling you what else is in the wind. There's such a thing as turning the tables on smart coons like you. I think I will stroll down to the Continental and play Dick Dashaway of Dakota. I'm just your build, you see, and have got on the rig you sported there. Our mustaches are something alike, and I think I can make up my face for you very neatly."

He took from a closet a wig which looked closely like Dick's dark hair. A few manipulations to his face, and he did not look much unlike the prisoner. He might easily pass for him with people who were not well acquainted with his face.

"I have a fancy to withdraw the little package I left in the hotel safe," he pleasantly remarked. "I have to take the night train West, on sudden business, so will pay my bill and receive my valuables. That ought to work, eh? You will be kind enough to wait here, in the

company of these gentlemen, till I return. I hope you will enjoy yourself."

There was a look of insulting triumph on his face. But Dick kept as cool as a cucumber. He was not yet ready to fling up the sponge. The spy, who had stood by the door during the colloquy, now unlocked it to let Hiram out, and locked it behind him. The villainous-looking customer then advanced with a harsh grin on his face.

"Hiram has got even with you," he remarked, "but I ain't. You knocked me into the corner, dash you. It's my turn now, and I'm going to salt you for it. Do you smoke that?"

Dick retreated till he stood beside the door. He did not like that hang-dog face, nor the ruffianly looks of the armed men in the background.

As the villain followed him up, Dick struck him square between the eyes, felling him like a log to the floor.

Ere the surprised villains could recover from their astonishment, Dick had flung a missile with a sure aim at the glass lamp. A crash of glass followed. Sudden darkness filled the room.

He stooped to the floor on the instant, and sprung through the open door in this attitude.

In a moment more he had gained the head of the flight of stairs, and was darting downward five steps at a stride.

CHAPTER VI.

A FOX IN A LION'S HIRE.

WITH the reader's permission we will return to the Continental Hotel. Its main hall was still thronged with people, for the night had not yet advanced. At the clerk's desk stood that individual, in conversation with a person who certainly presented a close likeness to Dick, the Dakota Sport.

"Will you be kind enough to let me have my bill?" he asked, with a great show of politeness. "I have just received a telegram that makes me dig for the night train west, so I won't have the pleasure of ruffling your bed-linen."

"What name?" asked the clerk, shortly.

"Dick Dashaway. Here it is on the register. Hardly dry yet. I'm the chap that's quick on the trigger, you see."

The clerk looked sharply up. He had a keen ear for voices, and these tones did not strike him as familiar. Nor did the face seem quite right. However he had only taken a momentary glance at Dick Dashaway, and this fellow was certainly like him. The clerk thought that his memory of faces must be going back on him. He proceeded to make out the bill.

"You have secured a room for the night. I shall have to charge you with it."

"All correct. You won't find anything mean about me. Bless you, man, chaps like me, that's used to sleeping in gold-mines, don't haggle about picayunes. Pile on all the extras. I'm agreeable."

He cast his eye over the bill presented him, while the clerk took another quick look at him. This speech struck him as a counterfeit of the true coin. It lacked something of the Dashaway flavor.

But there was nothing counterfeit in the way

in which the stranger opened his purse, and flung out a bank bill.

"There, take it out of that. Clap your fist to the bottom of the bill, and let me off. I've got to streak for the train. Is that clock of yours railroad time?"

"Yes. To the minute."

"Then here's for a fling. Sharp's the word with us western gents." He turned partly away, but swung quickly around again on his heel. "Dash my own carelessness, I was nigh forgetting! If it's all one to you suppose you just pass over this bit of plunder." He handed the clerk the receipt for the wallet. "That's what we call out West a vallyble package. Plank it down, and let me off on the jump, or I'll be dished for the Night Express."

His excited and energetic haste threw the clerk a little off his guard. Taking the receipt he turned to the safe and produced Dick's wallet, which he laid before the claimant, not without another momentary sense of doubt. Yet everything looked to be on the square.

The guest made a nervously quick movement toward it; but he checked himself, as if in fear of creating distrust.

"That's the plunder," he remarked. "Wouldn't I have kicked myself for a jackass if I'd pegged out without that jolly fat bundle. Good by. I'll drop in to see you the next time I come East."

He was on the point of picking up the wallet, when, to his utter surprise, another hand was laid flat down upon it. At the same moment he was taken by the ear with a pinch so sharp that it brought the tears to his eyes.

"Hands off, neighbor," came a familiar voice. "You're a gay buck from the Rockies, aren't you now! But you can't jump this claim, while your uncle's floating around."

The sharp pinch upon his ear drew his head around until, to his utter surprise and dismay, he found himself confronted by no less a personage than Dashing Dick himself. And it was the familiar Dick, in his antediluvian attire, his seedy hat set back upon his head at a raking angle. Some of the lookers-on broke into a laugh at his extraordinary appearance.

"So; you're a nice duck for a small party," continued Dick. "Thank your stars it was your ear and not your nose I went for, or I mightn't have left you enough for a respectable blow. Didn't calculate to have your neat little game discounted by the genuine Dick, eh?"

The masquerading counterfeit jerked himself loose from the pinch of Dick's thumb and finger. But his face continued full of astounded dismay. How came the man here whom he had left under the pistol-barrels of his associates? It seemed like the work of magic, and he was cowed in spite of himself.

In a moment, however, he regained his bravado, and dashed forward for the prize, which yet lay under Dick's hand.

"Let go," he cried, fiercely, "you infernal tramp? Release that wallet, or I'll hand you over to the police for a thief!"

"Stand back!" returned Dick, with energy. "You're playing with no baby now, friend Hiram. If you touch that leather with your dirty fingers, down goes your house."

The inclination to laugh in the observers was changed to a look of interest as this controversy went on. Some of the more nervous backed away. The clerk, who had been utterly taken aback by this sudden event, now stepped sharply forward, and laid his hand on the subject of dispute.

"What's all this row about?" he demanded, angrily. "Let go that wallet. I'll take care of it till I find who it belongs to."

"I hope you will," said Dick, sarcastically. "And not hand it over to every coon that goes for it. Is that the way you do business in this shanty? Blast it all, man, there's my signature!" He struck his clinched fist on the register. "Dick Dashaway, of Dakota. Look at me, and at this swamp pigeon, and say which is the genuine grizzly."

The clerk glanced doubtfully from one to the other.

"It is not easy to decide," he declared, "as I only saw you for a minute. Your face and voice seem more like the thing, but my guest was not dressed in any such rag-barrel suit as that. This man has the clothes and something of the looks. And he has presented the receipt for the package."

"And he's the man who intends to take it, if there's any law in Philadelphia," cried Hiram. "Is this the way you do business at the Continental? I have paid my bill like a man, and turned over my receipt for the package. Hand it over, and kick out this dirty ragamuffin."

The clerk looked from one to the other, and then made a movement toward Hiram. He had certainly produced the receipt, and he looked respectable, while Dick presented the aspect of a tramp. Hiram's face wore a triumphant smile as the clerk held out the package.

He made a movement to take it, but encountered Dick's intercepting hand.

"Hey, there!" cried the clerk to some of the waiters. "Run this fellow out. We don't keep open house for such cattle. Pitch him out if he won't go quietly."

"That's right, hoss," answered Dick. "I'm a neat football for niggers, ain't I? But if you want to live inside your skin you'd best freeze onto that plunder. Stand back there!" He turned to the waiters with such a fierce look that they incontinently retreated. "As for this chap he's a masquerading highwayman. I was enticed into a den of cut-throats and robbed of that receipt. I got away from them just in time to block his little game. Look here! This is the way they make up western men in your Quaker City."

He dashed at Hiram and tore the wig from his head, revealing short-cut hair, much lighter color, beneath.

"There's your lamb in a lion's skin. Look at him, and say who's playing possum."

The revealed villain stood discomfited by this revelation. He stole a foxy glance to right and left, and then sharply turned, and ran hastily for the entrance of the hotel.

Dick followed with a view halloo.

"Hoicks! Stole away! Stole away! Head off the hyena!"

But Hiram was too quick for him. He darted from the hotel door, and disappeared in the

crowd that thronged that part of Chestnut street. Dick returned with a reckless laugh.

"The fox has gone, but I took the brush," he said, displaying the captured wig. "He robbed me of my purse and clothes, gentlemen, and left me only this sorry rig in its place. And he'd have robbed me of more, only I stepped in here in time to discount him. Put that plunder away, Mr. Clerk. Hang on to it till I call for it. Just whistle up one of your darkies to pilot me to my room, for I've had enough sport for one day."

"I will keep this till its owner is proved," answered the clerk, in a tone of suspicion. "As for your room, you can have none in this hotel. We don't accommodate customers of your stamp. You had best hunt up quarters elsewhere."

"The blazes you say!" answered Dick. "You take men's money and kick them out, eh? Here's a receipted bill for supper and lodging for Dick Dashaway. You take my money, and then kick me out because I choose to put on a summer suit. I've a notion, Mr. Johnsing, that you've got the wrong sow by the ear. Can't play that little game on this wild colt."

As may be imagined, this scene had made considerable commotion among the hotel guests. They crowded around the clerk's desk, with various comments.

"I've seen that gentleman before to-day," cried one of these, a portly, dignified individual. "It's all a falsehood about his being decoyed by robbers, and made to put on that suit. I saw him this morning, swaggering along, with that same dress on."

Dick turned with a look of comical amazement at this remark.

"Will you be kind enough to move, and let this orphan see that knowing individual? Oh! so it is you, my cove! It's the swelling chap that wanted to walk on pavement and curbstone at once. You swore you would get even with me, because I gave you a little wholesome advice. I haven't forgot you, nary time."

"You were a swaggering blade, I know that," answered the angry citizen. "I have your card yet. I won't forget you, either, my blustering friend."

"I hope you won't. I like to be remembered. Suppose you just burn that piece of pasteboard. Knights of fortune, like me, don't float the same name all day long."

The gentleman produced Dick's card, with an air of triumph. He thought he had the best of his antagonist and could easily prove him an impostor. He handed it to the clerk.

"Read that. That's the name your sorry guest wore this morning."

The clerk read, with an air of surprise:

"DICK DASHAWAY,

"Dakota."

"Well," said Dick, turning with a sarcastic laugh to the citizen. "You've squelched me now. I ain't worth a pigtail after that dig. Don't you feel sorter good after your virtuous deed, eh? Why, you mutton-jowled jackass, you've played your cards square into my hands. Look at that name on the register! Look at this bill and receipt for board and lodging for

Dick Dashaway! If any gentleman here wants his jaw broke, just let him say again that I am an impostor. I've got an angelic temper, but I'm a little like a cat. It isn't safe to rub me too long against the wool. I've got a bill and a receipt for a room in this hotel. That's good evidence in any court in this community. What do you say, Mr. Clerk? It's a question of a room for Dick Dashaway; or a red-hot law-suit for this big shanty of a hotel. Let out now. You've got ten seconds to settle it in, and I don't care the toss of a penny which way."

The clerk looked angry, hesitated, bit his lip, and finally turned, much against his will, to a waiter.

"Show this gentlemen to his room."

"Lucky for you," said Dick loftily, as he stepped off. "You've saved the Continental."

CHAPTER VII.

DICK MAKES HIMSELF AT HOME.

"Is the gentleman that runs this shanty hanging round anywhere? Let out, quick, for I've got business with that wealthy individual."

There was a subdued laugh in the rear part of the store. The speaker was Dick, in his seedy costume. The establishment was that of John Blossom, Esq. Dick turned and set his scaly hat at its most rakish angle over his left ear, while his eyes sharply sought the locality of the laugh.

"Did my ears deceive me, or did I hear some virtuous youth indulging in amusement at my expense? Let the critter step out. I'd like to see his shape and size. It's been a week now since I've cremated anybody, and I've got a red-hot blast ready. It'd do me a heap of good to give that chap a cheap funeral."

But the laughing youth did not make his appearance. Dick, after waiting a moment, continued:

"Guess the fellow don't approve of cremation. But he'd best keep a damper on that little horn of his while I'm about. I want to see the blossoming individual that runs this establishment. Just hand him my card, and tell him that Richard Dashaway, Esq., is on hand."

"Mr. Blossom is not here yet," answered the clerk addressed. Dick's inclination to laugh was quite checked by Dick's fierce demeanor. "It is after his time, though. He will be here very soon. Will you wait?"

"Dunno," said Dick. "Got a press of business. Mought give him an hour, if you think that will fetch him."

"He will be here in five minutes."

"Show me in, then. I'll sacrifice myself on the altar of honesty and virtue."

The clerk ushered Dick into Mr. Blossom's private office; not without some doubts, as he glanced around the well-fitted room. But there was nothing there of any great value that could be carried off unseen, so he concluded he could safely leave the scaly visitor there until Mr. Blossom's appearance.

The laughter, which Dick had nipped in the bud, broke out again as soon as his back was turned, loud enough for him to hear.

"The bucks are having it out now," he soliloquized. "I'm agreeable. Let them burst with

fun if they want to. Can't hurt my feelings. I'm tough as shoe-leather on that side."

The reckless fellow seated himself in Mr. Blossom's softly-cushioned arm-chair, which he threw back till he could get his heels on a pile of correspondence on the table. Then taking a cigar from his pocket, he struck a match and coolly kindled the weed. In a minute a wreath of fragrant smoke was curling through the quiet air of Mr. Blossom's sacred room.

"There, now I begin to feel comfortable. Hope old Blossom won't bloom till I've had my quiet smoke out. Hate like poison to have business poked on me till I'm ready for it."

He continued to smoke with intense enjoyment of his cigar. He seemed lost in a reverie, which suddenly ended in his bringing his hand down with a sharp slap on his knee, while a laugh of triumph broke from his lips.

"By the heart of the Rockies, if that isn't a neat go," he ejaculated. "Never thought of it till that minute. Well, if I ain't got a ring in Hiram Boomer's nose, after all, then there's no snakes! Thought he had me, the blazing beggar: but it's a gay coon that discounts Dashing Dick!"

He continued to laugh with great amusement.

"Let me go over the whole queer biz," he resumed. "First he made me pony over a highly valuable document, which he buried in his pockets with great satisfaction. That was act number one. Then he flung the bones till he had me stripped to the skin. That was act number two. Then we both put on our old clothes. That was the third act of our interesting little play. Next I dug out with this here ripping suit and all its contents, including Hiram Boomer's valuable document, which he forgot to transfer. That was the fourth act. And now up goes the curtain for the fifth act, which is the reading of that interesting document. Oh! lawsee, won't Boomer be in a booming rage when he finds what a glorious ass he has made of himself!"

He thrust his hands into his pockets, and after a moment's search drew out the folded paper which Hiram Boomer had seemed so anxious to recover.

"Here it is," laughed Dick, as he again slapped his knee. "Just the neatest bit of luck I've seen for a century. Wonder if Hiram wouldn't like to rattle the ivories again? Bet you high he won't ring in this chicken to such another scrape as that last one. Mighty easy to throw double six with loaded dice; but it's my throw now, and I'm going to discount Hiram."

He opened the recaptured document, and cast his eyes over its contents. Dick knit his brows as he read on, and seemed at some loss to take in the meaning of the paper. But at length a light broke over his face, which soon became a jolly burst of laughter.

"Got it all in now," he ejaculated. "But I wouldn't if I hadn't heard that trifle of conversation about the girl, and how he had old Blossom under his thumb. If there ain't a neat bit of rascality afloat, I'm a Jew. And if I give my time to get old Blossom out of his scrape, he's got to bleed heavy. I ain't the sort of a coon that works for love."

While Dick was thus engaged John Blossom entered his store. He broke in with a hasty step, and with a flushed and angry countenance, which made the salesmen look askance.

"No hot buckwheat cakes this morning," whispered one to another. "The milk's all turned sour, and there's been young chickens in the boiled eggs."

Mr. Blossom stamped back, casting angry and sharp glances to the right and left, as if seeking for something to vent his anger upon.

"What's this order-book doing here?" he cried sharply to one salesman. "Is this the place for it? Am I to spend all my life making rules which nobody obeys?—Why is that box of goods standing open? I thought I ordered it closed last night.—Where's that boy? Send him here instantly, somebody. Move, some of you! Are my orders of no account in my own store?"

These sharp words made a commotion in the establishment. Most of those present hurried away in search of the missing boy; while the others tried to keep out of sight of their angry employer.

John Blossom was decidedly ruffled. He had good reason to be, for he had waited a full hour at the rendezvous made by Dashing Dick, without that gentleman putting in an appearance.

"There's a person waiting for you in the office, Mr. Blossom," announced the clerk who had shown Dick in.

"A person waiting! There's always a person waiting! Let him wait!" snapped Mr. Blossom. "I'm run down with persons, who only come here to bore me. Excuse me, Harry, I'm a bit out of temper this morning. And who wouldn't be? I've been diddled out of a thousand dollars. Clean diddled. It's enough to make a saint swear."

"Mercy! You don't tell me that!" exclaimed the clerk, holding up his hands.

"None of that! You know all about it. That wag of a Bently has spread it all over town. Heard folks laughing at me everywhere yesterday. The worst is, the fellow was to meet me this morning. Hang me if he did though. He has confiscated my thousand."

"I am very sorry to hear that," remarked the clerk sympathetically. "Something must be done, Mr. Blossom."

"Do you suppose I need to be told that? Where's that boy? Anybody found the young rascal yet? Oh! here you are, sirrah! Now be sharp, will you?"

"What about?" asked the boy.

"Wait till I tell you, ninny. Harry, write me off an advertisement, at once. Offer a hundred dollars reward for the recovery of a lost pocketbook. Say the finder is spotted, but no questions will be asked if the book is returned at once."

"Here it is, sir," answered the clerk.

"All right. Here, boy. Run to the Ledger office with this. Three insertions. Here's the cash to pay for it. When that's done stop at the Central Police Station. Leave word to send a detective up here immediately. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Off with you, then. Don't let the paving-stones grow under your feet."

The boy shot out of the store like a bullet from a rifle. He knew from old experience that it was not safe to waste time when Mr. Blossom was in his present temper.

"Think you will get it back, Mr. Blossom?" asked the clerk.

"Don't ask such ridiculous questions, Harry Blank!" snapped the testy merchant. "How can I know whether I will or not? The fellow was well marked. But I suppose he is as different now as a cat is from an elephant. Been investing some of my loose funds. Where's that person you said wanted to see me?"

"In your private office, sir."

"Very well, I'll go and be bored. If it's a book-agent or a tract distributor, hang me if I don't fling him out the window. I'm not in the humor for that sort."

Still testily growling, Mr. Blossom made his way back, and opened the door of his private office. He cast but a single glance in there, but in that instant enough changes passed over his face to make the fortune of a character actor. Indignation, astonishment, hope, fury, and perfect bliss, chased each other over his countenance. For there sat the very man who was the subject of all his thoughts, Dick Dashaway, himself, occupying his private chair, with his boot-heels on his private papers, and coolly smoking in that sacred room where the very smell of tobacco was absolutely forbidden.

The astounded merchant turned red and then pale. He blurted out some vague exclamation. Then he turned and rushed back into the outer office.

"Joe! Harry! Tom! Some of you, quick! After that boy! Stop him! Don't let him put in that advertisement! Turn him back from the police office! Here's the very man I want, waiting for me; and I've been making a blessed jack-ass of myself about him all morning."

"Tell the truth and shame the devil. That's my motto, Mr. Blossom," said Dick, taking the cigar from his lips. "How d'ye do, sir? I'm waiting for you, you see."

"Have you brought it?" cried Mr. Blossom, rushing forward with very undignified haste. "I have been waiting for you at the place appointed. Why were you not there?"

"Took a morning snooze, and spent too much time over my breakfast," acknowledged Dick. "And it's a shorter walk around here from the Continental, than up to the jumping-off place."

"The Continental?" repeated Mr. Blossom.

"Yes. You don't fancy that gentlemen of my standing put up at any one-horse shops, do you? Object to smoking, Mr. Blossom?"

"Decidedly," answered the merchant.

"All right. This is your shanty." Dick flung the remnant of his cigar into the spittoon. "Hope you don't mind my taking it easy. It's a way I have."

"I am not in favor of boot-heels on my private papers," answered the merchant.

"You're boss here," returned Dick, dropping his feet to the floor. "It's my motto that every man has a right to make his own rules for his own headquarters. In my rooms it's the rule to sit on the mantle-piece and hang your feet out the window. When you call on me, I shall expect you to do it."

"Have you brought the pocketbook?" asked the merchant angrily.

"What, the little drop-game book, eh?"

"I hope you'll excuse that. I was a little too wide awake, I acknowledge."

"I overheard a little conversation out in your store just now," continued Dick. "Somebody spoke rather loud, and these windows have ears. Something about a hundred dollars' reward for the recovery of a lost pocketbook."

Mr. Blossom looked rather blue.

"Oh, yes. But—you know—but—"

"But you want to creep out the little end of your own horn," said Dick, sarcastically. "Very well, then. I haven't the wallet with me. I know where it is; but poor chaps like me can't afford to be honest for rich merchants like you without a consideration. That's something that don't want to be translated, Mr. Blossom. You were so deuced sharp yesterday that I intend to be sharp to-day. If you're going to take water on your reward, why then—"

And Dick rose, and significantly set his hat on the side of his head.

"Oh, no! certainly not! Of course I'm a man of my word," Mr. Blossom hastened to ejaculate. "The reward is yours. Of course, on the return of the book."

"That's all square. You're a straight man, and I bet you don't find any straighter individual than Dick Dashaway of Dakota. Things and men all grow straight out that way. I suppose it's partly because we hang all the crooked kind. The book's yours. But just sit down a moment first. I have another little affair to discuss with you."

"I don't see that we can have any business except in relation to the lost pocketbook," said Mr. Blossom, haughtily.

"You don't, eh! Then you don't see all there is in the wind, that's all. Have you ever heard the name of Hiram Boomer, or of a tight squeeze in the daughter market? If you have, I'm your boss."

Mr. Blossom seated himself hastily, while all his dignity and haughtiness suddenly vanished.

CHAPTER VIII.

DICK ASTONISHES JOHN BLOSSOM, ESQ.

"JUST look at me, Mr. Blossom," said Dick, as he rose and turned himself slowly around.

"Investigate them high-minded pantaloons. Take in this rip-staving nobby coat. Measure the diameter of this antique beaver. I ain't just the style for a fashionable shindig, I give in. But bless your eyes, where I come from the clothes don't make the man. We don't swing b'iled shirts and French tips out in Dakota, nary time. If a chap's got a sound heart under a torn coat, and a lively brain in an ugly head, he's got up for the first society in them diggings. Do you take?"

"What has that to do with the subject of our conversation, Mr. Dashaway?" asked the surprised merchant.

"This much. I want you to know that I'm a straight man, if I'm not got up in the tip of the fashion. You can see the measure of a man in his eye better than in his buttonhole. See here,

John Blossom, Esq., do you know that you're a confounded old villain?"

"What do you mean, sirrah?" cried the merchant, starting to his feet in a rage. "Do you come here to insult me?"

"I mean just what I say, old man. Dashing Dick never yet swallowed a word that he had once let out; and he isn't going to begin now. Let me have my talk out, and then if you can make me out a liar, why just kick me into the street as you'd kick a mangy dog. I say that you're playing the confounded old reprobate."

"This is strange talk to a man in his own office," returned Mr. Blossom.

But he resumed his seat, growing a little pale in the visage.

"A man can't get rid of his record by shutting the door of his private office," answered Dick, with cool determination. "Shall I shut down this sash, Mr. Blossom? Or do you want this talk retailed?"

"Yes, yes, shut it," replied the subdued merchant. "And now go on. What do you mean by such an extraordinary piece of impertinence?"

"I mean just this. A man that's grown to be sixty years old, and hasn't learned any more decency at that age than to sell his daughter to a gang of dirty blacklegs, ought to be kicked out of respectable society. Guess that's about your measure."

"How dare you, sirrah! What do you mean?" And Mr. Blossom sprung to his feet with a very red face.

"Say it isn't so, and I'll give you back your pocketbook without a cent of reward. Say you're not selling her, body and soul, to Hiram Boomer, the bloomingest young reprobate this here town holds. Say that Jeremiah Bunce isn't squeezing you like a ripe persimmon. Say that you ain't playing into the hands of two of the dirtiest dogs in your Quaker City. Say any of this isn't so, and I'll cave instanter."

Mr. Blossom stood looking at the speaker with a very red and highly-scared countenance, as he poured out these surprising accusations. The merchant tried two or three times to speak, but only emitted a feeble gulping sound. At length he dropped nervelessly into his chair, blurring out with a strained voice:

"I—I deny it all. Hiram Boomer and my daughter are engaged. He is her lover. I defy any one to prove anything else."

"Well, as the girl is your daughter, and I've never seen her, I don't know why I should kick my heels through your dirty linen, as long as you're bent on wearing it. There's no society in this town for the prevention of cruelty to daughters. But I'll be hanged if I believe if you're such a bloody old rogue as you want to appear. You're being squeezed, John Blossom. This Jerry Bunce is squeezing you. Don't say I'm lying. You've tumbled under that rascal's thumb, somehow."

Mr. Blossom grew pale, and began a denial. But he checked himself and blurted out hastily:

"How did you find it out? You are a stranger here. Oh, sir, I am a very unfortunate man! I am in the most dreadful strait. You will not reveal my secret?"

"Don't know it yet," said Dick, shortly.

"Guessed at the most of it. But I've got a mighty sharp nose for rascality. I can smell a rogue a mile off. Tell you what it is, friend Blossom, you've got yourself in some deep hole, and you're going to let these hounds push you deeper. Do you recollect the motto I gave you when you came in here just now?"

"No," answered the merchant.

"Tell the truth and shame the devil. That's solid logic. There's some disgrace in this business, I suppose. Folks will talk about you. The solid record of John Blossom will be blown to the winds of gossip. 'You've done something you're thoroughly ashamed of, eh?'"

"Yes," answered the penitent merchant.

"And so, to hide one dirty act, you are going to do a dirtier one. I hope you're not confounded jackass enough to fancy you can hide disgrace that way. You are only sinking yourself deeper in the mire. These fellows are making a tool of you. They will squeeze you till you're like a dry lemon skin, and then toss you away empty. And after all the whole job will come out. Take a boy's advice, let it out now, if they choose to spread it, and save your daughter."

"I dare not! I dare not!" moaned the unhappy man, letting his head fall weakly on his hands.

"It's sound advice I'm giving you," continued Dick. "We wild Westerners always hit straight from the shoulder. Never go round barns. The straight ahead track is the safest one. Tell that hound Bunce to go to Davy Jones, and blow his prettiest. That's Dick of Dakota's way."

"No, no!" groaned the miserable merchant. "I could not live under the disgrace!"

Dick scratched his head, looked dubiously around the office, and then burst out with the energy of a school-boy:

"I ain't much given to carry other men's loads on my shoulders. But somehow I've took a fancy to you, old man. And I'd give a ship-load of salt-bags to get even with Hiram Boomer. Just let me into the merits of this little job. I'll take it on, hang me if I don't! Between you and me I've got my thumb on them roosters already. If they try to crow just you see if I don't make them squeal. There's two ways of dealing with rascals, Mr. Blossom. One way is to defy them, and the other is to circumvent them. If you won't try the first, then let me try the second. I've trailed rascals on the plains before now, old man, and I calculate I can scout blackguards in the city."

Dick looked so energetic, knowing, and self-confident, that the merchant took heart from the assurance of this strange ally. After a short hesitation he began to reveal to Dick the strange story of his troubles.

A half-hour passed away and still the pair of confederates were in deep consultation. What they had to say to each other is John Blossom's secret. We will not venture to spread abroad the disgraceful affair which he so desired to conceal. The cat must get out of the bag its own way, not through our gossiping talk.

At the end of the half-hour their conference was brought to a sudden termination. The

door of the office quickly opened, with the freedom of a privileged character.

It was a very handsome young lady, a fresh-faced, bright-eyed girl, prettily dressed, and as neat and blooming as a May blossom. Her face was not without its shade of sadness, which lay upon it like a veil of vapor on a bright sky.

"Papa!" she cried, quickly. "Oh! excuse me, I did not notice you were engaged. I will wait, and—"

She stopped short, and burst out into a laugh of such infectious merriment that it set all laughing that heard it. She had caught a glimpse of her father's odd companion, looking just then doubly ridiculous, with his sorry tile pushed back till it rested on the rear of his head, and his mustache twisted into the fiercest French curl.

The laugh came from her as uncontrollably as a burst of sunshine through a rent cloud. She could not for her life have hindered it. She checked herself as quickly as possible, and turned away very red and confused as Dick cast up one of his quick, keen glances.

"What is this?" cried Mr. Blossom, rising hastily. "I thought— Oh! it is you, May. And what in the world are you laughing at, girl?"

"I don't know—I—ha! ha! Because—because I am happy, I suppose. Ha! ha! ha!"

She burst into a louder and more uncontrollable laugh than ever, as the full ridiculousness of Dick's appearance came upon her.

"Child, child!" cried Mr. Blossom, reprovingly. "I am surprised at you."

"Excuse me, papa," she hastily cried, flinging her arms around his neck, and fondly kissing him. "I am a little idiot, I know. But I don't often misbehave so."

"Have your fun out, Miss Blossom," said Dick gallantly. "It's just like cream in coffee for me to be laughed at by such pretty lips as yours. I'm a jolly ridiculous coon, I know. But bless your sweet eyes it's all done on purpose. I'd 'most as soon be laughed at as kissed. We raise that sort out West, you know."

"Excuse me," she penitentially answered. "I—that is—" She quite broke down in an effort to explain.

"This is my friend, Mr. Richard Dashway," announced the merchant. "Mr. Dashway, allow me to introduce you to my daughter May."

"I am sure I am very happy," answered the young lady, bowing demurely. "I—can I speak to you a moment, papa? Will you excuse me, sir?"

"Only too glad," bowed Dick, with a sly glance at the sparkling eyes of the little beauty. "And any time you want to laugh, Miss Blossom, don't mind me. I like to see the young folks enjoy themselves."

Miss May, with a very red face, hastily drew her father from the office, and out into a corner of the store. Here she buttonholed him earnestly for several minutes, striving to look grave, though smiles would ripple over her face, and at least one burst of merriment came to Dick's ears.

"I thought I was a trim figure of a man," he soliloquized. "But hang me if I relish being laughed at by such a dear little beauty as

that. A sweet figure of a May Blossom she is, and I'll be shot if I let her be tangled up by that bramble-bush of a Hiram Boomer. Could set my cap for such a little lovely myself. You bet I'm going to discount this rig. Don't mind the street rabble; but it goes against the grain to be laughed at by a blossoming young puss like Miss May. I was only half-hearted in this job of old Blossom's; but I'm going into it now, body and boots. Before Hiram Boomer shall snatch up that rosebud, I'll marry her myself, hang me if I don't!"

Miss May soon finished her business with her father, who returned to his confederate in the office.

"If you will take a stroll down to the Continental, Mr. Blossom, we will settle that little affair of the lost pocketbook. I suppose you are solid on the reward?"

"I will make it two hundred," exclaimed Mr. Blossom. "I consider I owe you that on account of this morning's work."

"You're a gentleman!" cried Dick, enthusiastically. "I won't refuse; for I've completely worn out the lining of my pockets. It takes some virtue to hand over that plunder, Mr. Blossom, for I'm just the hardest-up coon in these diggings. Virtue ought to be rewarded, they say. Let's peg out, sir. They've shut down on me at the Continental, so I want you along to prove property."

Many eyes were cast on the strange combination, as the solid merchant and the reckless and oddly-dressed Westerner walked together along the streets. Dick noticed this, and fell behind, advising Mr. Blossom to walk on alone.

Hardly had he done so when he observed a familiar face and form approaching. It was none other than that of the portly citizen with whom Dick had already a double encounter, and who had vowed that he would repay him.

On meeting Mr. Blossom the person stopped and held him for a few moments in conversation. Dick walked on ahead.

On turning to let the merchant overtake him, he noticed that Mr. Blossom had an excited and flushed aspect.

"Did you notice the person that just stopped me?" he asked Dick.

"Yes. Who was he?"

"That is my enemy, Jeremiah Bunce."

"The deuce!" a long, loud whistle came from Dick's astonished lips. "You don't tell me that's Jeremiah? Why, bless your dear soul, I've got a little crow to pick with that gent myself. He piled it on me a bit, yesterday. I handed him my card. It's war to the knife between me and Jeremiah. Swore he'd get even with me, the jack rabbit. I'm your boss, right from the shoulder, Mr. Blossom. Hiram and Jeremiah! Why, I'd sooner abolish them two coons than strike a gold-mine."

The clerk of the Continental looked grimly at Dick, as he swaggered up to the office of the hotel.

"Now, my good sir, I'll trouble you to hand over that trifle of plunder which you shut down on this morning. Do you recognize this gentleman?"

"Mr. Blossom, of Market street, is it not?"

"At your service," answered the merchant,

"Very well," returned Dick, sharply. "That cash-book belongs to Mr. Blossom. If you don't believe me, open it, and you'll find out for yourself."

The clerk at this produced the book, and examined its contents. There was abundant evidence there that it was indeed the property of the merchant, whose eyes glistened on seeing it.

"Mr. Dashaway is correct. This is your property, Mr. Blossom," said the clerk, handing it over.

"And it's about time you were learning the shape and size of an honest man, young fellow," answered Dick, sharply. "As I said to you once before, you've saved the Continental."

CHAPTER IX.

A PAIR OF INTERVIEWERS.

WE must begin this chapter, like the last, in the private office of John Blossom, Esq. The worthy merchant has another caller this morning, and one apparently less agreeable to him than Dick, the Dakota Sport. This is the portly, middle-aged, consequential person with whom Dick had had two hostile encounters, and was likely to have more, since, as Dick had just learned, this was that Jeremiah Bunce whose schemes he had vowed to counteract.

The merchant has a careworn look, and something of the aspect of a cornered deer as he sits before his self-satisfied visitor, whose face wears a hard and merciless expression.

"I have it here," said the visitor, tapping his pocket significantly. "And I have you here." He pressed his thumb hard upon the table, as if he had John Blossom beneath it, in the shape of a fly. "I can crush you as easily as I can snap that pen-handle. He broke the frail piece of wood in illustration of his power. "You hear me, John Blossom. I am not here to be played with. You have my ultimatum. If you were to pray to me on your knees I would not go back on a word of it."

"You have it there?" repeated the merchant, casting a peculiar glance upon his foe.

"Here," answered Mr. Bunce, very pompously, laying his hand significantly on his breast-pocket.

"Then what's to hinder—" Mr. Blossom half-rose, with a threatening look in his eyes.

"Sit down, John Blossom," cried his tormentor, sternly. "You are thinking of bringing your crew in from the store, and taking it from me by force. Do not attempt to deny it. I see it in your eyes. Why, old man, I hope you did not think I was booby enough to bring the original. Hardly. Jeremiah Bunce has had his eye-teeth cut, let me tell you."

"Can I not buy it from you?" exclaimed the tortured merchant. "It is only a slip of paper, not worth the fifth of a cent. I will pay you five thousand dollars for it."

"My dear sir," answered Bunce, "the paper may be worth nothing at all, but you are entirely forgetting the value of the ink upon it. Gold does not begin to weigh like that one penful of ink. Diamonds are dross in comparison. I could not think of selling that valuable ink for any such trifle."

"Then what do you want for it? Name your

price. I will give anything in reason to get finally rid of such a vampire bat."

"Hard words butter no parsnips, Mr. Blossom," answered his visitor. "You are a wealthy man and doing a good business. You set a high value on your public reputation. I can crush it for you with a turn of the hand, and show the people what sort of a man the worthy Blossom really is. You cannot buy me off with money, sir. I am not quite poor, thank Heaven. And I do not know but it is my duty as an honest citizen to expose the fraud whom they nurture in their midst."

"Very well, sir," cried the merchant, stung to indignation. "Go on, then. Do your worst. I defy your malignity!"

He rose and very firmly put on his hat.

"That's quite judicious," remarked Bunce, with a sarcastic smile. "I am very ready to take you at your word, and announce to the public that John Blossom, the prosperous merchant, the earnest church member, the high-minded public officer, is a fraud and a criminal. He is a—"

"Hush! hush!" ejaculated the poor merchant, in a sudden agony of fear. "For mercy's sake, man, you may be heard! Do not say that word here."

"I don't intend to be heard till the proper time comes," replied the smiling villain, "and then I shall be heard with good effect. But you cannot bribe me, John Blossom. You know the price of silence."

"To give my only daughter, my loved daughter, in marriage to a dubious stranger, of whom I know nothing, and who may be the veriest criminal," groaned the merchant.

"He is a very honest and clever fellow, I tell you," answered Mr. Bunce with a virtuous look. "Hiram Boomer is a good fellow. He loves the girl, and she loves him. What great sacrifice is this?"

"She hates and despises him!" exclaimed Mr. Blossom. "I know she does, although she tries to wear a pretense of enduring him, for my sake. But I cannot bear to see my dear daughter wearing her soul out with secret pain."

"The girl is a fool," broke out Bunce in harsh accents. "They all have some babyish fancy. She will get over it. They all get over it. I am sure Mr. Boomer is a handsome and gentlemanly fellow, who will make her a very good husband. I can't see what all this pother is about."

"I don't believe a word of it," cried the merchant. "You are afraid to tell me who or what he is. And what is the bottom of all this? Why are you so anxious to marry off this nobody-knows-who?"

"He is a *protege* of mine," returned Bunce, with a look of importance. "He is in love with your daughter. He requested me to interview you in his favor. I am doing so. You refused me at first, John Blossom, on the childish plea that the girl has another lover. But Jeremiah Bunce never does things by halves, and never takes no for an answer."

"Ten thousand dollars," pleaded the distressed father. "It will almost beggar me. But I would give my whole fortune to save my dear May from distress."

"That's all nonsense," cried Bunce decidedly. "I won't be bribed, I tell you. It's the girl or nothing. And mighty quick. I am not to be played with." He rose, put on his hat, and buttoned his coat with an air of virtuous determination.

"Yes or no, John Blossom. And quick, I say. This affair has been debated long enough. If I leave this office now without a final answer, that will be the end of it. Say yes now, or this goes into the hands of the authorities before an hour."

The latter hesitated, extended his hands appealingly, looked imploringly into the firm and hard countenance of his visitor, and at length cried out in a tone of deep anguish:

"Yes! yes! You have your answer! Go. Torment me no more." He fell into his chair, and dropped his tortured face upon his hands.

With a smile of contempt the hardened villain turned shortly upon his heel, and left the office.

Mr. Blossom continued for several minutes in an attitude of abasement. He at length lifted his head, with a less hopeless and distressed expression.

"I have only that strange young man to trust to now," he declared. "Can I depend on him? Dashing Dick, as he calls himself, looks honest and energetic. I hope he may prove so, for he is my last hope. My daughter, my poor daughter! if he saves you from this fate he will earn my eternal gratitude."

While this scene was transpiring, another scene, closely related to it, was taking place in another part of the city. In the parlor of a handsome mansion stood a young gentleman, with an elbow on the mantle, and one foot on a chair, waiting apparently, but with a very easy face, as if he was in no hurry.

He was neatly and handsomely dressed, in black coat and white vest, over which flowed the links of a neat gold chain.

Yet the face was none other than that of Dick Dashaway. It was the butterfly out of the cocoon. Dick had shed his seedy suit, and donned an attire which brought out all the possibilities of his fine form and handsome face. He would hardly have been recognized now as the tramp-like individual who had swaggered into the city, with empty pocket and stomach, a few days before.

"Wonder if she'll laugh at me now," he queried, looking approvingly at himself. "I've a notion I'm a bit improved. Never was much given to make myself a tailor's walking sign; but there's no going back on it that a well-shaped leg is the better for a neat fit. Who'd have thought, two days ago, that seedy Dick Dashaway would be sporting the young gent to-day, and with some golden nest-eggs in his pocket. There's nothing like brass and dash. Wonder when Miss May intends to show her pretty face?"

He was answered by the opening of the parlor door, and the entrance of the young lady in question, who came into the darkened room with a smiling face and a swish of silken skirts.

"Harry!" she exclaimed, in warm accents, as she hastened forward. "I am ever so glad! I

did not dream of your coming to-day, and it is so good in you—"

By this time she was across the parlor, and almost on the point of flinging herself into Dick's arms. And it may here be said that that young gentleman showed no signs of an intention to convince her of her mistake. She checked herself just in time, and drew back in blushing confusion.

"Excuse me—I did not know—I thought—"

"You thought it was Harry," he replied. "Wish to Heaven it was, too. I've always been called Dick; but I'll change my name on the spot if it will be any accommodation to you."

"No, no!" exclaimed the confused girl. "I thought— But, excuse me, sir. Was it me you wished to see?"

"I see you have forgotten me, Miss May," answered Dick. "The other day you had the fun of a good laugh at me. To-day you came near making the serious mistake of kissing me. That wouldn't have hurt my feelings any more than the other, I promise you. It is astonishing how much of that sort of thing I can stand."

"Why, it is Mr. Dashaway!" exclaimed May. "The room is so dark I did not recognize you. And besides, you have certainly changed."

She hastened to raise a curtain and let in some light.

"Just so, Miss Blossom," said Dick, walking forward. "I was making a martyr of myself, trying to introduce our fashionable Dakota costume. But, bless your eyes, it didn't take worth a cent."

"I should think not!" laughed the merry girl. "Why you looked as if you had stepped out of a twenty-year-old fashion plate. I think you must say that our Philadelphia tailors are more civilized," and she looked at her handsome and well-dressed visitor with some admiration.

"Can't say," answered Dick, indifferently. "I kind of cottoned on to that old suit. Picked it up in Chicago, at a raffle. All I had left of a gold mine. I tell you what, Chicago is a swimming place to go through a gold mine. You should have seen me make the ore jump in the stock market. Why the wool fairly flew from the innocent Dakota lamb."

"You lost a gold mine in speculation?" queried May, with wide-open eyes.

"You don't know what a swallow that Chicago stock board has. Why, a gold mine is only an after breakfast snack to it. They squeezed me dry as a sucked orange, and then tossed me aside to make room for other innocents. Excuse me, Miss Blossom, I didn't come here to bother you with my own little affairs. There's one other matter I want you to post me on."

"With great pleasure," murmured the young lady.

She was evidently taken by Dick's off-hand manner.

"It is only about that Harry episode," he coolly remarked. "Pardon my impudence, but I thought his name was Hiram."

"Hiram! No, indeed, sir! That is— I mean," she confusedly murmured. "Yes, sir, his name is Hiram. I made a mistake in saying Harry."

"I suppose you think I'm an impertinent wretch, Miss Blossom," continued Dick. "But as long as I've got my foot in it, I might as well go in up to my neck. If you feel like pulling my ears for my impudence, just pull away. I won't grin. We Westerners have our way of blurting right out. It isn't Hiram, Miss May. That card won't play with me. Harry's the man, and you hate Hiram like original sin. Just let it out. I've come here to help you out of your scrape, if you're in one. You hate Hiram, that's the long and short of it."

The young lady had worn a dozen expressions during this speech. She changed from red to pale, looked angry, dignified, hurt, and finally curious.

"I cannot see what it concerns you, or why you come here to meddle in my private affairs," she indignantly cried.

"It's because I'm a meddling fool, I suppose," Dick quietly answered. "I'm always digging my fingers into somebody's pie. 'Tisn't impudence, though, it's business fetches me here to-day. Just ask your respected father if that ain't Gospel. Now see here, Miss May. There's a game afoot to make you marry Hiram Boomer, whether or no. It don't make an ounce of difference to me. If you want him take him. I won't stand between. But if you don't want him—if they're squeezing you to marry him against your will—you've only got to let it out, and I bet I make Hiram think there's a whole hive of bees in his hair. That's me, Dashing Dick of Dakota."

The girl looked at him with surprise and bewilderment. She could not quite take Dick's measure. But a gleam of hope glided over her pale face as she admitted in a low voice:

"Why, Mr. Dashaway, you are so peculiar. I hardly know what to say. Yet I—I prefer Harry."

"Solid affection!" exclaimed Dick. "And you hate Hiram like rank poison. Say the word, and it's all up with Hiram."

"But my poor father is in trouble," confessed the trembling girl. "I must save him. I—I don't like Mr. Boomer. But I dare not say so. I have given my promise."

"That's right, Miss May," declared Dick. "An honest confession is good for the soul. Now I don't like Boomer any more than you do. The dirty bound has got some hold on your father, but I bet high I get a hold on him, and squeeze him so tight that he'll drop you like a hot potato. I'm in earnest, Miss May. I've got the whip-hand of that customer already. I bet he won't like the squeeze of a Dakota infant. And when I discount friend Hiram you can give me for reward—"

"What?" hurriedly asked the excited girl.

"Only that kiss which you were so eager just now to waste on Harry."

CHAPTER X.

DAYLIGHT BEGINS TO BREAK.

IN his pleasant room at the Continental sat Dick, the Dakota Sport. That young gentleman was bound to keep at the top of the market while he had a copper in his pocket.

"Living is a little steep here for a poor cuss who was ready to beg for a crust a week ago,"

he said to himself. "But as long as I've got my crust, with a thick spread of butter on it, I'm not going to back water while the butter lasts. Whole hog or none, that's my motto," and Dick wet his lips from the glass of wine before him.

He was very comfortably fixed indeed, in a roomy and well-furnished apartment, with a meerschaum in his mouth, while his chair was tilted back till it was a miracle how it escaped a backward tumble.

"When I've got a job of hard thinking on hand," he soliloquized, "I want to be comfortable first. And according to my notion there's more solid comfort in the bottom of a pipe-bowl than in a ship-load of cigars. I've got a regular Rocky Mountain of a job before me, and it's a question of broadcloth or corduroy with me. If I win old Blossom has to bleed. If I lose the old sinner will kick me into the street without a copper. I know human nature that much. But money or not I want to squelch the infernal crew of Bunces and Boomers, and save that pretty May Blossom from being sold for the devil's price to the devil's crony. And I'll do it, too, or bust. Dashing Dick ain't easy dis-counted."

He dropped into silence, while he smoked furiously, sending thick clouds of vapor through the air. Dick was thinking desperately, trying to hammer into some shape the loose hints of the rascally scheme which he had picked up. The deeper he thought the more vigorously he smoked, so that his pipe served as a sort of thermometer, to register the opinions which were playing through his brain.

He took from his pocket the captured document, and very carefully examined it, reading it word by word.

"I'm not quite a fool," he remarked to himself. "And I'm not entirely blind. And hang me, if I don't begin to catch a glimpse of daylight through this fog. Now let's lay this business out seriatim, as the lawyers put it. First place, Jeremiah Bunce has got some sort of a squeeze on John Blossom. That salubrious merchant has done something in his life he oughtn't to, and Jerry has got the document to prove it. Trick number one. Second place, that document ain't for sale. Money's no object. Only your daughter's hand to my young friend Hiram. Very good. But Jerry isn't the coon to chuck a big check overboard. He flings away because he can't help himself. Hiram Boomer has got a squeeze on him, and this little contract comes from that squeeze." He struck the paper in his hand. "This is a neat agreement, by which Jerry agrees to supply Hiram with a wife, and Hiram agrees to let up on Jerry, and on the marriage day to hand him over a certain important document. Trick number two. There's a double squeeze. Bunce on Blossom, and Boomer on Bunce. To finish the game there wants a third squeeze. Dash-away on Boomer. And that squeeze is bound to come, you bet. If it don't, then I'm going to emigrate to the Sandwich Islands. There's too many rascals in this United States for an honest orphan like me to vegetate here."

Dick ended his long soliloquy with a sip of wine, a long puff from his pipe, and another silent cogitation.

"There's more in the wind yet," he muttered. "Miss May has a pair of lovers. There's the young sprout Harry Earle, that she's sweet on. And there's the gay duck Hiram Boomer, that she's got to marry to please her daddy. Now Harry is Jerry's own nephew. Jerry's favoring him above-ground, and playing against him underground. Going back square on his own blood. Now, what's the deep game in this? Let's see." He sent up a mighty cloud of smoke, and rubbed his fingers in desperate energy through his hair. "Jerry's got plenty of cash. Inherited his fortune. Folks expected it would go to Harry Earle, but it went to the uncle instead of the nephew. The young fellow left with hardly enough to buy him a decent coat. Folks surprised. Don't wonder they were. Shouldn't be surprised if it was here the deviltry comes in. Let's get that through my thick noddle. Forged will. Hiram Boomer in it. Maybe that youth did the forgery and hung on to the original. Been bleeding Jerry ever since, and Jerry's getting him a rich wife to buy the document back and get the load off his shoulders. By Jupiter! that begins to look like daylight." Dick got up and danced around the room in delight at his own shrewdness.

"There's more in it than Hiram," he cried, with a sudden recollection. "There's that hang-dog looking friend of Hiram's. He's let into the game, too, because they daren't keep him out of it. There's my 'possum. I must get my fingers on that coon. He ain't got no rich wife and no fortune in his eye. That chap can be scared or bought, and I'm going to try both on him. Bet my fortune against a pig's tail that I've got the right bull by the horns; and if I drop him it won't be the first bull I've flung by a Dakota trip!"

Dick flung his hat in the air in his exultation. He then dabbed it tightly on his head and left the room. He wanted fresh air. He was so full of his scheme that the narrow room choked him. He must have all outdoors to breathe in. He would have given something valuable just then to be on the prairies, with a wild mustang under him, and a free dash over the broad earth-ocean of the West.

At very near the same time that Dashing Dick thus broke from the hotel door into the human river of the street, a conversation in which we have some interest was going on in a room not far distant from that locality.

The parties to this conversation were those who were just then the subject of Dick's earnest thoughts, Jeremiah Bunce and Hiram Boomer. They were seated in a retired room, in the second story of a house on Ninth street. From the apartment adjoining this room in front, tones of voices and other sounds came, as if something peculiar was going on there. But the two confederates continued their conversation with little attention to these noises.

"I've got it all in shape, I tell you," remarked Bunce, in continuance of their conversation. "Old Blossom has flung up the sponge. The girl is yours for the taking."

"She is playing confounded shy of me lately," remarked Hiram.

"Suppose she is. Do you calculate she is going to drop her old beau and take you on as a

chap might change mint-drops for sugar-plums? She's promised her daddy not to kick against the match. You're a handsome and a dressy fellow, Hiram. It's queer if you can't break her of this old fancy."

"I will, or I'll break her neck," was the furious answer. "Let me get young madam once, and I bet you high she don't play her high strikes on me."

"That's your lookout," answered Bunce, shrugging his shoulders indifferently. "But let me tell you if I once give up my hold on old Blossom you've got to handle the young gosling tenderly, or you won't find the old duck ready to bleed."

"There's some good wit in that," answered Hiram, struck by the force of the observation. "Guess I'll have to play the kind dodge till I get a stake."

"I don't care a fig what you do," answered the elder rogue. "All I want is for you to keep your part of the bargain, and let me out of the scrape."

"The paper goes into your hands the minute the young lady says yes before the preacher," rejoined Hiram.

"And the other part of the plan?"

"Oh, about young Earle. Don't you mind that. I'll fleece him. He's took the bait bad. Swallowed it hook and all. I never see anybody have the faro fever worse. Why, the idiot dropped a clean five hundred on the cards last night, and went away tearing his hair. But he'll be back again to-day with another stake. I know the breed. He will be clipped as close as a sheared sheep before a week."

"That's the dodge. Clean him out completely. Drive him from the city; out West, or anywhere. I never feel quite safe while that boy is about. If you can only make a beggar of him, I will offer him the cash to carry him out West, and thank my stars to be well rid of him."

"You are a regular sharp one," remarked Hiram, with a glance of admiration at the older rogue.

"I don't think we could be easily beaten for a sharp pair," answered Jerry. "But see here, Hiram. What about this faro bank? You are not going to run it after you get married to a young lady of high social standing?"

"No," rejoined Hiram. "I'll drop faro then and take to stocks. High toned gambling. Must have some sort. This bank pays well, though," he continued, with a sigh of regret. "It will be slaughter to give it up. There's a good game going on there now. Hear them."

It was easy now to tell, from the loud sounds and voices, the character of Hiram Boomer's business. He was the proprietor of the faro bank, in which some high play seemed be now proceeding.

"Shall we adjourn front?" he asked.

"Wait a minute. There's another little matter to settle. That dirty cur that follows your heels, Jake Trumper, knows of this business. We must shut him up somehow. He may blow on us."

"That's all provided for," returned Hiram. "Why, you could buy off that fellow any time for five hundred a year. But I've got a neat dodge on foot to settle him."

"What's that?"

"To turn over the faro bank to him after I'm done with it."

"Neatly done," cried Jerry in admiration. "There's nothing like providing for your responsibilities."

In the faro bank, as we have said, some lively play was in progress. It was a large room, well provided with all the essentials of gambling.

"There is Earle," Hiram nudged his confederate, as they entered the room together. "And losing. You can see it in his face."

The door of the gambling saloon meanwhile opened, and two persons entered. One of these was no less a personage than Dashing Dick, who had been invited to this den by a hotel acquaintance.

The quick eyes of the Westerner took in the whole concern at a glance, and his eyes sparkled as he recognized the faces of his two foes. Without a sign of recognition, however, he walked up to the faro table, and looked over the shoulders of the players at the game going on. Young Earle was yet in the tide of his ill-luck, and was growing more excited as he continued to lose.

A sarcastic smile marked Dick's face as he watched the play of the young scapegrace. But the smile faded from his lips and was replaced by a stern expression as he observed the manipulation of the cards by the dealer. Evidently Dick had seen faro dealt before.

"There is my last bet!" cried Earle, as he slammed a handful of bank-notes on the table.

The dealer covered the bet, with the impassiveness of a wooden man. He continued to deal the cards, piling them successively on two heaps to right and left.

"Queen wins for the bank," coolly remarked the dealer, reaching out his hand for the bet.

But he did not get it, for another hand covered it in advance—the hand of Dick, while the eyes of the bold Westerner wore an expression that made the scoundrel quail.

"Hold hard!" cried Dick sternly. "That cat won't jump, my hearty! You can't cheat this innocent boy to his eyes in the face of your uncle, Dick, the Dakota Sport."

CHAPTER XI.

A SQUARE DEAL AT FARO.

WE need not say that an intense excitement followed this bold action of the daring Westerner. The people around the table backed off, in dread of a fight. Those in the rear pressed forward. The dealer sprung to his feet with a furious countenance, and in an instant confronted Dick with a loaded cane. Hiram leaped forward with a cry of rage.

"What in the blazes does this mean?" he yelled with an imprecation. "How dare you interfere? Hands off that money or it will be worse for you! Gentlemen, I call on you for protection against this thief. He would rob the bank before our eyes."

"Then it's your bank, is it?" asked Dick. "It's you that runs this shebang?"

"Yes. What is that your business?"

"Nothing. Only I never deal with the devil's imps when Old Nick himself is at hand. Here,

young fellow, lay your hand on this cash, and stick to it like grim death."

"You're a thief through and through!" yelled Hiram, half mad with rage. "You robbed me of an important document. Where is it? Hand it over."

"There might be two words to that," answered Dick, in his coolest manner. "You robbed me of five hundred dollars, so we're quits. See here, Hiram, I'll put up the paper against the five hundred, and a turn of the cards shall decide who takes both. So long as you run a gambling-hell you can try your luck against Dick, the Dakota Sport."

Hiram's eyes glistened at this bold proposition.

"It's a bargain!" he cried. "We'll put a fresh pack in the box and draw for the winner."

"Not much," answered Dick sarcastically, as the pack was produced. "Why, you don't dream, in your innocent soul, that I'm donkey enough to buck against that box and that dealer? We don't wean our babies out West on such skim-milk as that. I'll show you a trick worth two of that, my jolly rooster. Hand me a hammer and a nail."

These implements were brought, while the party looked curiously on to see what Dick intended. He was not long in showing them. Setting the sharp-pointed nail on the center of the pack, he drove it with one vigorous blow, through the entire pack and deep into the table.

"There's a Rocky Mountain faro-box," he cried, as he flung the hammer aside. "There's no trick springs about that machine. And this young man shall deal. This game has got to be on the square, and I want no tricky coon to finger them cards."

Some conversation followed. But Dick's proposition was evidently a fair one, and no reasonable objection could be made. Young Earle commenced tearing the cards one by one from the nail, and laying them in two heaps, face upward on the table.

"Left you win, right I win," cried Dick, as card after card appeared.

All present bent with great interest over the table, as this went on, every one anxious to see the end of this unusual match.

"And right wins!" cried Dick, as a final card was drawn from the nail. "Guess I'll rake in that little stake, Mr. Boomer, if you've no objections."

An angry and dismayed expression marked Hiram's face, as Dick grasped his winnings with a look of triumphant malice.

"Kind of sorry for you, my hearty. But you can't say this paper isn't mine fair and square now."

"Not till you win it again!"

It was a strange voice that spoke these words. All eyes turned curiously toward Jerry Bunce, as he came forward from the rear of the saloon, where he had until now remained. Dick looked up quizzically.

"Hello, old hoss. It's the chap that owns the Philadelphia pavements, is it? So you're going to keep your oath to get even with me?"

The youthful dealer looked hastily up, and exclaimed in surprise:

"My uncle! You here?"

"Your uncle, eh?" cried Dick. "And what's your name, young chap, if it's fair to inquire?"

"Harry Earle, sir."

"The deuce!" Dick whistled in his surprise. "I've heard of you before. Why, you're the bloomingest young ninny that I ever dropped on, to be bucking such a ripping tiger as this. Come, Jeremiah Bunce, if that's your name, as long as you want to fight out our challenge, you'll not find me fly the field. Make your bet, and I'll cover it."

"Cover that," he said, briefly.

"I'm your coon," answered Dick, laying the document on the cash. "Seems to me you chaps set considerable store by that bit of paper. It's nothing to me except a sort of fool's contract. Go ahead, my jolly youth. Rip up the papers. Right wins for Dick, left for Jeremiah."

Young Earle again began, with nervous hand, to tear the cards from the nail and lay them successively on the two heaps.

"Left!" cried Jerry in exultation, as Dick hesitated in his count. "And a square win for me. I rake that pool!"

"Take it!" returned Dick, indifferently. "I'm well paid for a bit of useless paper, anyhow. Come, Harry Earle. You're my chicken. I'm not going to leave you to be plucked by these bawks. Why, they wouldn't leave you a feather to bless yourself with in an hour's time. Come with me."

A look of baffled rage passed over the faces of the confederates at this remark. Evidently they were not pleased to see the young dupe snatched from their clutches.

"See here, gentlemen, I ain't quite the green gosling you take me for, as I'll let you know in mighty short meter. Can't I see that you are trying to skin this youngster, and get rid of him? And what for? Shall I tell?"

"Yes; tell and be hanged!" roared Hiram.

"Then one reason is that you are both going for the same girl; and because Harry is ahead of Hiram in the race. I won't name the young lady here, for she's not the sort to have her name bawdied in a gambling-hole."

"And what's your other reason?" asked Jerry, angrily.

"Because the uncle has a notion to get rid of his nephew. I won't say what for. Don't want to stir up this heap of rascality and let out the bad smell that's under it. Touche! you in a sore spot, have I, gentlemen? You're squirming, are you? Dashing Dick's a rough pole to climb, you'll find that. Come ahead, Harry. We'll leave them to stir those lumps of sugar in their coffee."

Followed closely by the youth, Dick walked, with his freest swagger, from the room, leaving his two antagonists with pale, dismayed and astonished countenances.

CHAPTER XII.

DICK GETS IN HIS WORK.

WE must pass rapidly over a few days, in which Dick did not remain idle. He was beginning to see his way clear through the maze of rascality with which he had undertaken to deal, and was laying his plans for a counter-march on his foes. There was no waste time in

Dashing Dick's operations. When he went into a thing he did so with his whole soul, and he had made up his mind that this thing was to be put through. Yet it was not all smooth sailing. He had contrary winds to fight against. One of these was the fancy of Miss May Blossom.

"I can't do it, and there's no use trying," she petulantly cried. "I adore Harry Earle, and I despise that Hiram Boomer, and it isn't in me to say one thing and think another."

"Guess you've always been used to having your own way, Miss May," said Dick, quietly patting his knee. "You've been the boss of this sbanty. Daddy and mammy have had to stand round. I can see plain enough that they've just made a baby of you."

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed the young lady, starting up with a flaming face. "Do you wish to insult me?"

"Scarcely," answered Dick, in his easy way. "Don't mind waking you up a bit, though. You've got to quit playing the baby now, and begin to play the woman. Your daddy is in a scrape of the worst sort. You've got to get him out of it."

"By marrying Hiram Boomer? Never!"

"I'd sooner see you marry Old Nick himself," remarked Dick. "But you've got to coddle up Hiram, and make him think you mean it. I'm working for you, but you must do your share. These rascals have got to be managed, Miss May, and I fancy you're the girl to manage them. Your daddy has given his word, and you've got to stand by it, or there may be everlasting Cain raised."

"And how about poor Harry?" queried May, with tears in her eyes.

"Just you bluff Harry. We can't trust him with this business, for he's got a loose tongue. Cut him off short before Hiram. That's the way to draw on that 'possum."

"But he will be driven to despair. He will jump overboard."

"No he won't. I'm training that youth. I've handled young colts before now. You bet I break him into the traces."

"I don't understand your horse talk," answered the young lady, with some indignation. "What do you mean by breaking colts to the traces?"

"That's Dakota blather. Don't mind it," laughed Dick. "But Harry Earle won't jump overboard. I've got him in tow."

"I would make any sacrifice for my father; but I cannot marry that man," said the poor girl with a shudder. "You may fail. I may not be able to retreat! Yet I would rather die than marry him!"

"There's no law in these United States to make you say yes when you mean no," rejoined Dick. "Play with him till the last minute; if it's even to stand up before the minister. If all fails then you can back out at the last step. It's easy to bring a horse to the fence, but it's not easy to make him jump it. You understand?"

"Yes. But I do hate to play the hypocrite."

"Maybe you'll find that there's worse games than to play sharp on a rascally sharper."

This was good advice perhaps, but Dick was making trouble for himself in another quarter. A few days after the above conversation he met

Harry Earle, with a face the very picture of despair, and hurrying on with downcast head, as if looking for a pool of water deep enough to drown him. Dick caught him by the shoulder with little ceremony, and brought him to a sharp halt.

"Whereaway, my hearty?" he cheerily demanded. "Haven't heard of the bank bursting where you keep your deposits, eh? Look as down-hearted as if you'd been struck by lightning."

"Let me go!" cried the young man hotly. "How dare you stop me so rudely?"

"Only to find out where you're going," declared Dick, without releasing him. "If you're off to butt against faro you'd best take me as a looker-on. Or if you're going to drown yourself maybe you'd like company."

The distressed youth looked at his sarcastic questioner with tears in his eyes.

"I don't know what I am going to do," he hotly declared. "She has despised me! She has insulted me in the face of that dog of a Boomer! I don't want to live! I don't want—"

"You want to make a fool of yourself," rejoined Dick. "There's as good fish in the sea as ever were caught."

"I will never love any but her! I will die if she discards me!" exclaimed the poor lover. "And she seemed to love me so."

"All right, my lovely, you shall have her yet," Dick soothingly answered, as he softly stroked Harry's fair hair. "You're the age to make a soldier, and here you are turning your back to the enemy. See here, my lad, do you think I am a square man?"

"I have every confidence in you," replied Harry, with a look of admiration.

"Very well, then. You shall win May Blossom, take my word for that. You saw our little game of faro?"

"Yes."

"There's a bigger game than that up. You dealt at faro. You may have to deal in this game too. I want your help, Harry. Whether I win or lose, you shall win. Before I let Hiram Boomer snatch up that little lass I will make a spread-eagle of the low-minded cuss."

"But what does it all mean?" asked Harry. "There's some mystery here."

"So there is; a blazing hot mystery. And it has got to stay one. You'll get into the secret some day, if you are a good boy. The question just now is, have you given up your notion of jumping overboard?"

Harry hung his head sheepishly and made no answer.

"If you have I'd like a little help from you."

The youth, with a look of shame, laid his hand in Dick's broad palm.

"If I can do anything," he faltered.

"It's to help you to win May."

"Then I will do anything!" and he straightened himself with sudden energy. "To win May! I will sell my soul to win her!"

"Best sell your old clothes first," Dick dryly answered. "Chaps that sell their souls never make a good bargain. Come with me. I've got a job for you now."

In a short time afterward they were seated together in Dick's room at the hotel.

"Now, my lad, hold hard till I get my pipe in a blaze. Somehow I've been spoiled in my education, and I can't half think except through the smoke of a meerschaum."

They were a strongly contrasted pair, as they sat facing each other over the width of a table. Dick, with his handsome, reckless, keen-cut face, his sharp eyes, and the easy look of a man that could make himself at home in any climate, from China to Patagonia. Harry, with his youthful, innocent countenance, his mild expression, and his evident ignorance of the ways of the world. The one was all dash and smash; the other of a retiring, dependent nature. The one was made to lead: the other to follow.

"There," said Dick, as the smoke began to curl upward from his pipe-bowl. "Now I'm comfortable. See here, Harry, what's your opinion about that pious uncle of yours; that blessed Jeremiah Bunce?"

Harry hesitated and colored.

"Perhaps I had better not say," he answered.

"It is a family matter."

"Maybe it is a public matter," returned Dick, sharply. "I didn't fetch you here to pull my chestnuts from the fire, my lad; but your own. See here now. The money that ought to have been left to you was scooped up by uncle Jeremiah. Did he get it honestly?"

"The will gave it to him."

"I don't know about that," and Dick drummed uneasily on the table. "Wills can be made to order. I've a fancy this was one of that sort. And—"

"And what?" cried Harry excitedly.

"Did you ever suspect anything of the kind?"

"Yes," was the hot answer. "At the time there was talk of a later will, that had been made way with. But no such will could be found, and the matter fell."

"Good," cried Dick. "That suits my game. I tell you what it is, Harry, I believe in the later will. I've a notion I've got my eyes on the chaps that salted it. What's more I believe that that missing will is still alive, and if we play our cards right we can handle it."

"By Heaven!" cried Harry, springing up excitedly. "I will give you half the fortune if you prove what you say, and make my rascally uncle disgorge. None of us believe that he came by it honestly."

"I have the thing in train," said Dick approvingly. "There's a big dog and a little dog in this business. The big dog has the crust, but the little dog may steal it from him. I've hunted the little dog. Have written to him in your name that if he comes here he will hear of something to his advantage. I expect him every minute. It won't do for me to take part in the business, for the cur is afraid of me. I want you to deal with him, and if you fail then I will put in my oar. Are you in for it?"

"I don't understand you," answered Harry, confused by Dick's way of putting his project.

"Keep quiet, then, till I peg it into you in plain English."

A conversation of considerable length ensued, in which Dick laid down the details of his plan, and coached Harry as to how he was to act. He took care, however, not to mention Hiram

Boomer's name as one of the parties to the fraud. It was too soon yet to trust the young lover with that bit of information about his rival.

The conversation was finally interrupted by a knock on the door. Some quick movements followed. The knock was repeated ere Harry opened the door. When he did so Dick had disappeared. There was but one occupant of the room.

The visitor was a fellow dressed in a very loud suit of checkered stuff, which he wore with an affectation of smartness. His face wore a coarse expression, and a look of low villainy that was not prepossessing. It was, in fact, Hiram Boomer's companion, the man who owed two square knockdowns to Dick Dashaway.

"What can I do for you, sir?" asked Harry, with quiet politeness.

"I s'pose this is the place," answered the other, in a hoarse tone. "I was to call here for something to my advantage. Now I'm the chap for that sort of thing. I'm dead on the make."

He handed Harry an open letter.

"Oh, yes! It is Mr. Trumper?"

"Just so. I'm your man."

"That letter came from me, Mr. Trumper. Sit down. I wish a little conversation with you."

Mr. Jacob Trumper crouched in the chair offered, and fixed his heavy eyes on the innocent face of his host, with a look of eager avarice.

A conversation of considerable length followed, in which it quickly proved that Harry Earle was no match for the trained rascal with which he had to deal. Despite the coaching which Dick had given him, Harry very quickly let the whole cat out of the bag, without getting an ounce of confidence in return. An offer of reward was of no use, the fellow stolidly denied any knowledge of the affair.

"You're a neat coon, you are," he coarsely declared, "to fetch a chap all this way on such an arrand! Wonder if I look like a chap as steals wills. Dang me ef I'd stand long to punch your head for your imperdence. I'm an honest man, clear through, that don't deal in any crooked work. I've lost a whole day to come here on this business, and shoot me if you sha'n't pay me for my time. I want a ten square down, or I'll punch your brain-pan for your imperdence!"

"I'll give you a hundred for the recovery of the will," answered Harry.

"S'pose you say a thousand, and tell me where it is."

"It is in the hands of your confederate. I do not know his name. Bring it to me, and the thousand is yours."

"Not much. When I do crooked work I want pay in advance. Plank down the cash on the nail, and I'll be a square coon."

"Hardly," answered Harry. "I am not quite such a fool as that."

"Then you'd best pay me off and let me slide. You've made a fool of me, and you've got to pay me for it. If you don't pony down—"

"What?" asked Harry, retreating.

"I'll go through you, that's all," and the villain advanced, threateningly.

"Hold," cried Harry, in affright. "I will give you the ten."

He took out his pocketbook, and began nervously to extract the money demanded. The villain's eyes glittered.

"'Tain't worth while to make no split," he hoarsely declared. "Hand it all over, or I'll burst your b'iler."

"Stand back!" cried Harry, indignantly.

"You ain't going to crow over Jake Trumper, little chicken, hey? By the blue blazes—"

"What?"

It was another voice and another tone. The villain turned, and recoiled as he recognized the well-known face of Dick Dashaway.

"Highway robbery, is it, you dog? I've got you by the wool now, blast your eyes! If you don't pony up that stolen will, into Cherry Hill prison you go, quicker than greased lightning."

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS.

THE would-be robber was decidedly taken aback by this sudden change in the state of affairs. There was a gleam in Dick's eye that cowed his craven soul, and a clutch in Dick's fingers that reminded him of previous knock-down arguments.

He could not tell whence this spy had so suddenly appeared, though an open closet in one corner of the room hinted at a hiding-place.

"Straight to Cherry Hill, is the word, my jolly canvasbacker," continued Dick. "I caught you at highway robbery, and I'm the witness for this gentleman. You've got to flunk, you bound, or up you go, at telegraph speed."

"I were only playing with the boy," growled the discomfited villain. "It were only a lark."

"All right, Jake Trumper; but you can't play your larks on this coon. Squat down here. There's one way for you to get off. But if you play shy I'll railroad you to the stone jug, sure as shooting."

Trumper seated himself, with a surly but frightened face.

"What's in the wind?" he grumbled. "Don't see no use in making sich a howling row 'bout trifles."

"Sit down, Harry. You can be witness to a little bit of business between me and Mr. Trumper. Now, my man, I want a straight answer, or I'll have a policeman in here before a cat could whisk her tail. Who stole that will?"

The culprit started, while a look of nervous dread passed over his face.

"It wasn't me!" he hastily ejaculated. "I had— What are you talking about, anyhow?" he angrily continued, as he recovered his wits.

"Won't do, Jake. "You've put your foot in it," answered Dick. He saw, indeed, from the hasty admission of the frightened rogue, that he was on the correct track. "You stole it, you bound. You and your black-mouthed partner, Hiram Boomer."

"Hiram Boomer?" ejaculated Harry, in deep amazement.

"That's the chap, my boy. The cat's out of the bag now. Now, my charmer, who kept that paper, you or Hiram?"

"I know nothing about it," was the surly answer. "Hiram's his own boss."

"And yours too, it seems. See here, my duck, you'll not get much more out of Hiram, let me tell you that. He's going for his innings. Let him once get what he's after, and he'll toss you over like a dry crust of cheese. If you had the wit of a cat you'd see that. It's my notion you'll find it to your advantage to go back on the man that's intending to go back on you. Anyhow, I'm not the sort of chap to play with. You've got two roads before you. If you fight shy, I'll clap you in Cherry Hill as sure as your name's Jake. If you put that paper in my hands, I'll pay you down a thousand dollars and let this burglary trick slide. Here's the game. Make up your mind like lightning, for I'm not the sort to hang fire."

By the workings of the prisoner's face, it was evident that he was debating this matter in his mind. Dick's keen eyes rested on him like those of a tiger on its prey. There was not an expression of the heavy countenance, but its meaning was clear to him. Jake was evidently wavering.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," suggested Dick.

"I don't see no bird in the hand," answered Jake. "It's easy to talk 'bout paying, but I'd sooner have the cash than the promise."

"Name your terms!" cried Dick, sharply. "No use beating about the bush."

"Five hundred in hand, and fifteen hundred when the job's done. I won't touch it for a cent less."

"Hiram has the paper, then?"

"I ain't, anyhow."

"You know where to lay your hands on it?"

"'Tain't going to be so easy. "I s'pose I can rummage 'round. But he's a suspicious coon. If he finds what I'm arter, there'll be a holy old row. But anyhow, if you come down with the fodder, I'm your boss. I'm 'bout tired of playing second fiddle to Hiram Boomer."

Dick turned quickly to his companion with a look of keen intelligence.

"You hear that, Harry? The cat's out of the bag now, tail and all, and all the Boomers and Trumplers in creation can't put it back again. The will was stolen, and this fellow was in it. Now look here, my man, I'm not going back on you. I only want to let you see that you've not got a fool to deal with. Bring me the paper and you get the money, fair and square. But if you try to play me foul I'll squelch you like a rat. I've got my spies on you, and if I see a sign of playing false I'll snatch you bald-headed. Do you take that in, Jacob?"

The villain looked cowed by the keenness of his captor. He could not but see that tricks would not pay with this wide-awake individual.

"When I say a thing I mean it," he declared, with an effort to look honest. "Five hundred down and the balance when I fetch the paper. Say that's a bargain, fork over the needful, and I'm your man."

"A bargain it is," answered Dick, quickly, as he seized his hat. "Come with me. You shall have the cash instant. Strike while the iron's hot is my motto. Wait for me, Harry. I'll be back inside an hour."

Dick, with an alert step, led his heavy-browed companion from the hotel, and up Ninth street

toward Market. Reaching the latter street, he sought John Blossom's store, Jake still following.

"Mr. Blossom in?" asked Dick, smartly, of one of the clerks, who failed to recognize him in his spruce attire.

"Yes, sir. He is in the office."

"Engaged?"

"I think not."

"All correct. I'll dive in. Come ahead, Jacob."

Mr. Blossom was seated writing at his desk. He looked up with an air of annoyance as the two visitors bolted into his private office, without the ceremony of knocking. But his brow cleared when he recognized Dick, who made no bones of helping himself to a chair.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Dashaway. Wait one moment."

The merchant continued to write, while Dick balanced himself easily on his chair, and his companion stood awkwardly against the door, holding his hat with an effort to appear respectful.

"There, that's out of the way. Now, how do you do? And what's in the wind?"

"Spry as a young mustang," rejoined Dick. "But you ain't quite done with the pen yet. Write me a check for five hundred dollars, payable to bearer."

"Why?" cried the surprised merchant. "On what account?"

"On my account," answered Dick, briefly. "I wouldn't ask for it if I didn't want it."

"But I am not in your debt. Why should I hand over money at your asking?"

"I won't force you, you bet," answered Dick, quietly rising. "Come, Jacob, that dog's dead. I'd have you know, Mr. Blossom, that I'm a square man, from head to heels. When I go into a job I go in for all there is in me. I want this check in your interest. If you don't choose to give it without a bushel of reasons for receipt, that ends the game. If you doubt me, then marry your daughter, where you will. Come, Jacob."

"Hold, there!" cried Mr. Blossom, hastily springing up. "Come back here! Let me know what's all this about."

"It's about the size of a five-hundred-dollar check," answered Dick, curtly from the doorway.

"Why, you cantankerous spitfire! Come, come, I'm not afraid of you. Here it is." He snatched up his pen and hastily dashed off the required check. "Here's the document. But you have a regular highwayman's style of demanding it."

"That's a way we have in the West," rejoined Dick easily. "But it isn't a highwayman's job, for all that. Here you are, friend Jacob. I've knocked you down twice in our short acquaintance. Let this plaster up your hurts."

"Can't take that," rejoined the surly rascal. "They'd kick me out of bank, or snatch me, if I offered it. Cash in hand is the stuff for this chicken."

"Shouldn't wonder," returned Dick. "You don't look like the sort that swings that kind of dust. Hand it here; I'll cash it. They won't kick me out of bank."

The reckless fellow drew a purse from his

pocket, and counted out five hundred dollars on the table.

"There's your dough," he said, with a laugh. "That's my stake from Hiram Boomer. Going to make friend Hiram pay for his own salt-ing. Take your provender, Jacob, and make tracks."

The villain's eyes glittered as he saw the pile of crisp bank notes. He seized them quickly, and was about to dart hastily through the door, when his progress was arrested by a strong grasp upon his shoulder.

He turned somewhat fearfully to meet the eyes of Dashing Dick, which were fixed upon his heavy face with a keen and threatening expression.

"Not so fast, my cove. I know you, but maybe you don't quite know me. I tell you what, boss, if you're thinking to play foul on me you'll find it the hardest tree to climb you ever tried on. I've got a hundred eyes on you. You can't wink cross-eyed but what I'll know it. Play square, and I'll play fair. But try to trick your uncle, and into Cherry Hill you go on the jump. Do you take?"

"I am not going back on you," answered Jake. "You pay too well for that."

"Slide then. And don't go to sleep on this game. The minutes count."

"I can do it in a week," answered the villain, as he hurried away, as if in fear of his prize being taken from him again.

Mr. Blossom looked up at his strange visitor with an inquiring glance. He hardly ventured to ask Dick to what purpose his cash was to be devoted.

Nor was Dick in any hurry to inform him. He seated himself easily astride the chair, fixed his eyes upon the doubtful face of the merchant, and coolly inquired:

"What's afloat? Any new game turned up?"

"Nothing, except that Jeremiah Bunce is pushing me hard. He demands that the marriage shall take place in a week from to-day."

"Whew! He's spry. Did you give in?"

"I had to. He was positive. It was ruin or consent."

"Well, see here," returned Dick, half-angrily. "I'm doing my best for you, John Blossom, but it isn't sure that I'll succeed. The business must go on, to keep these fellows quiet until we are ready to show our hands. But suppose we fail. Suppose the hour of the marriage comes, and our game flummicks out. What's to be done, then?"

"The marriage must go on," answered the merchant, with a very downcast face. "It will be that or ruin. It must go on."

"Not by a jugful!" roared Dick, indignantly.

"Not by the full of a catamount's hide! Why, hang your old buttons, before I will stand by and see your sweet daughter sacrificed to that wretch, I will kick Hiram Boomer into the middle of next week, and you after him! Ruin, is it! You make a terrible splutter about your ruin, but would let your daughter go to ruin at race-horse speed! I didn't think you were such a confounded old jackanapes! Keep quiet now. Not a word. I'm not in the humor to be played with."

Dick walked the floor energetically, fuming

and growling. At length he paused before the shame-faced merchant, and fixed his eyes upon him with a queer expression.

"You bled like a boss, John Blossom. Keep quiet now, and I'll tell you what's to be done with your five hundred dollars."

CHAPTER XIV.

A SWAP ALL AROUND.

HARRY EARLE'S face was burning with rage, dismay, and twenty other feelings, as he burst into Dashing Dick's room with the exclamation:

"You have cheated and deceived me! You have lied to me! She is lost, lost! I will kill myself! I cannot live in despair and disgrace!"

Dick lifted his eyes coolly from the paper he was reading, and fixed them with a humorous expression on the excited speaker.

"Private theatricals, Harry?" he asked. "You did that well. Let's hear you try it again."

"Do you mean to insult me?" cried the angry lover, bustling up in a fury. "You have made a fool of me, I say. She is to be married to that wretch, and I am to be abandoned to despair."

"There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip,' my jolly youth. Sit down and cool yourself off. Hiram hasn't caught his bird yet. And he won't catch her while I'm about. Look at me, square in the eye. Do I look like a half-and-half? By the blue blazes, Harry Earle, if I didn't know that you were a love-sick jackass, I would kick you out the window for calling me a liar to my face!"

"But the hour is fixed! She has consented! She treats me shamefully! What am I to think? You have not got the paper that was to save her!"

"And I'm afraid I won't get it," rejoined Dick. "Jake Trumper is acting on the square, but he has not found that interesting document, so far. We'll have to wait till the last minute."

"But if it is not found then?"

"It's no marriage till the bride says yes to the preacher. She's got to take the man for better or worse. Hiram's all worse, so she needn't take him."

"Come, you hot-headed boy, you've got yourself in a stew about nothing. You want a breath of fresh air to blow away these vapors. Let's take a walk and cool off."

Into the street they went, and Dick led Harry a dance through the length and breadth of the city at a pace that kept the younger man at a half-trot. It was a free Dakota stride, and no mincing city walk. Harry was grasping for breath when at length they came to a halt.

"There. I fancy you've had a breather. Now go to your business, if you have any, and keep the girls out of your brain. I tell you Hiram Boomer shall not have her, if I have to marry her myself. That ought to satisfy any reasonable creature."

"But I don't want either of you to have her," gasped poor Harry.

"All right, you love-struck ninnv," laughed Dick. "It's between you, me, and Hiram. She can take her choice. But you've got to get

yourself up fast, for I'm a dreadful taking chap with the girls. Now get out with you, and don't bother me any more. I'll meet you at the wedding at sharp two to-morrow."

He hurried away laughing, while Harry stood with a very dubious face, not quite sure whether this was jest or earnest.

The day passed. The next day dawned. Jake Trumper had not yet come up to the mark. He needed to be very cautious, as he informed Dick, in his search for the document, for Hiram had kept closely at home during the last week, and gave him no chance for a fair search among his papers.

"To-day is his wedding day," said Dick, to his agent. "He has got to peg out or lose his bride. You keep an eye open, my hearty, till he leaves his house. Then you dig in. If anybody meddles say that Hiram sent you to look for an important paper, that he needs. They won't suspect you. If you get it, strike like fire for this point." He gave written directions to the agent. "Two o'clock is the hour. Do your prettiest, Jacob, and hang me if I don't add another five hundred out of my own pocket to the reward."

"I'll do it, if it is in the wood."

"Good for you. Streak out now. Go for Hiram like a dog for a marrowbone. I'm a generous soul, you bet!" he laughed, after Jake had hurried away. "A chap might think my pocket was bursting with cash. But there's nothing like an extra feather to your arrow, when things are in a tight place."

At two o'clock that afternoon an interesting group was collected within the parlor of John Blossom's showy up-town residence. Among them were the merchant himself, looking very blue; and Jeremiah Bunce, with a highly satisfied expression of countenance. Before them stood Hiram Boomer, dressed expensively, though somewhat loudly, and May Blossom, as pale as the white dress in which she came to the sacrifice. The bridegroom was undoubtedly a handsome fellow, but the look of gloating satisfaction which he cast upon the bride revealed the low instincts of his brutal nature.

There were two or three other persons present, but no bridesmaids or groomsmen, as it was intended, for obvious reasons, that the marriage should be strictly private. In the background stood two other persons, unobserved by the principals in the ceremony: Dashing Dick, with his easy, reckless face, and Harry Earle, half lost between hope and despair.

"It is all over," whispered the dismayed lover. "Your man is not here. Oh! what shall I do?"

"Do nothing but keep cool," answered Dick. "I'm here, at any rate. It's queer if I don't out-boom our Boomer."

The minutes passed on. As the hour of two struck, from a neighboring clock, the minister stepped forth from an adjoining room, ready to proceed with the ceremony.

He viewed with a wondering eye the party before him, the triumphant faces of the two villains; the pallor of the bride, who looked ready to fall; and the aspect of terror and despair on the face of the father. The quick sense of the minister saw that something was amiss

here. But these people knew their own business, and it was his business to proceed with the ceremony.

It went on slowly. He seemed to be purposely protracting it, as if to give the parties a chance to retract if they wished. There came the sound of steps and whispers behind the wedding-party, but no one looked around except the merchant, who caught a quick sign of encouragement from Dick.

"Do you take this man to be your wedded husband, to love, honor and obey, in sickness and in health, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, until God do you part?"

The voice of the minister rung in rich solemnity through the room. It was the critical moment. All waited in suspense for the answer of the pale bride.

But there came a sudden and most unexpected interruption.

"Just hold it at that for one minute," demanded the sharp voice of Dashing Dick. "There's more than Hiram have a claim on this young lady, and I've sworn she shall have her choice!"

He pushed forward, dragging Harry with him.

A look of fury burst into the face of the bridegroom, as he saw who had made this interruption.

"You here?" he ejaculated, in a rage.

"Hold your hosses, Hiram," returned Dick, easily. "I've a queer fashion of dropping down where there's rascality going on. You're a gay coon, but you can't snatch up ripe apples in this town without somebody else wanting a hand in it. Here's three good-looking fellows in a row—Hiram Boomer, Dick Dashaway, and Harry Earle. I've promised that the young lady shall have her choice, and, by Jupiter, she shall, or there'll be queer ructions! Here we are, Miss May. Pick out the man you want to marry, and, by the Rocky Mountains, you shall have him!"

The distressed girl looked up with a quick flush of hope. The pallor of her face gave way before a rosy glow. Her eyes beamed as she sprung impulsively forward, and flung herself into Harry's arms, crying out:

"My own love! My own true love! Oh! you are in time to save me! I will have none but you!"

It need hardly be said that this sudden scene created a deep consternation. The minister started back in alarm. Hiram rushed toward Dick with clinched fist and burning face. Jeremiah flew to the merchant in a hot rage. A sudden gleam of hope shone on Mr. Blossom's face.

"Hold hard, Hiram," cried Dick, as he ward off the intended blow, and caught his antagonist by the collar. "What ails you? Ain't I dished as well as you? She's picked out Harry Earle. It isn't my fault that the girl has her own fancies. We've got to give in."

"Never! I will never give her up!" exclaimed Hiram, making a wild rush to the bride, who was sobbing in the arms of her lover.

But he forgot that Dick had a hand on his collar, and he was suddenly brought up in his mad career. The infurled bridegroom

now turned hotly to Jeremiah, as he wildly yelled:

"Keep your bargain! Make him give me the girl, or, by the Lord, I'll make it hot for you!"

Jeremiah cried in almost the same words to the merchant:

"Keep to your bargain, or it will be hot for you!" and he significantly touched his breast-pocket.

Mr. Blossom paled and trembled, as the full meaning of the villain's words came upon him. He was about to speak when he was prevented by Dick.

"Maybe somebody else might make it hot for the pair of you," he declared. "I've been countermining your game, you villains, and it's my put in now!"

"What do you mean?" they cried in simultaneous alarm.

"I'll tell you that in short meter. Excuse me, reverend sir," he addressed the minister, "this is a squeeze all through. I've got a little story for your ears. In the first place, in his younger days John Blossom has done some sad trick. Let us say forgery—only for illustration, you know. Let us say that this man, Jeremiah Bunce, has got hold of that forged paper, and is using it as a squeezer. In the next place, this man, Hiram Boomer, has the squeeze on Jeremiah. So he makes a written contract with Jeremiah to let up on him if that individual will force John Blossom to give him his daughter for a wife."

"It's a lie!" yelled Hiram. "You can't show any such contract!"

"Softly, Hiram," answered Dick, with an easy wave of the hand. "You won it from me at faro, eh? Maybe not. I've a notion that was only a copy. I happen to have the original safe on hand."

The discomfited villain fell back with a muttered oath at this sudden revelation of how he had been tricked.

"In the third place," continued Dick, "we come to Hiram's squeeze on Jeremiah. There was a certain old gentleman made a will in which he left a neat little property to Jeremiah. Maybe he afterward found out Jeremiah, for he made another will, in which he left the same property to Harry Earle, our young friend here. But somehow, after his death, the last will disappeared, and Jeremiah became the heir."

"That is a slanderous lie!" cried Jeremiah, though with a pale face. "There was no such will."

"Softly, Jeremiah," continued Dick, in his sarcastic tones. "That will happens to be still in existence. Two friends of yours, Mr. Hiram Boomer and Mr. Jacob Trumper, of course unknown to you, took charge of that document. Mr. Boomer hung to it. And, your reverence, that will is the squeeze which Hiram has on Jeremiah."

"It is a false slander!" cried the two accused men in a breath. "You cannot prove a word of it!"

"Maybe not. But I fancy the court would recognize this paper."

He held a broad sheet of parchment before

their astounded eyes. At that instant Hiram perceived the face of Jake Trumper in the rear of the room, and he cried in dismay and rage:

"Ha! traitor! This is your work, is it?"

"Jist so, Hiram. I found there was more money on t'other side the fence," grinned the undismayed villain.

"Now see here," continued Dick, easily. "I've took this little game in hand, and I'm going to put it through. In the first place I intend to offer a square swap. Let Jeremiah hand over that interesting paper to Mr. Blossom, and he can have this document. What do you say to that, Harry? Will you trade the property for the girl?"

"Yes, willingly," said Harry, in delight.

It was like pulling out his eye-teeth as Jeremiah slowly drew the cherished paper from his pocket, and handed it to Mr. Blossom, whose eyes glowed with eagerness. But Dick had him by the hip, and there was no retreat.

"Is that the genuine hoss-fly?" asked Dick, of the excited merchant. "There ain't no nigger in the wood-pile?"

"No, no! This is it! I am safe at last, thanks to you!" and he tore it in hurried eagerness into a hundred fragments. "So to the winds goes my long dread!"

"Here's to you then, Jeremiah," said Dick, handing him the will. "I'm solid Injun. When I say a thing it's as good as sworn to. And now, friend Hiram, there's another little document. As long as you won this interesting contract from me at faro, I calculate it's your property. I suppose I needn't ask you to give up the girl. I don't believe you could be dragged with wild horses to marry her now. But as long as you're at hand, and the minister bandy, you might as well wait and see her married to Harry Earle, since she prefers him to two good-looking chaps like you and me."

"I'll be shot if I will then!" cried Hiram in a rage, as he stalked furiously to the door, followed by his fellow villain. "And I'll be even with you yet for this day's work."

"Jolly, my lovely," exclaimed Dick. "That's the kind of gruel I was weaned on. Name time, place and weapons. I don't know anybody I'd sooner salt than you."

A laugh broke from the lips of the reckless fellow as the discomfited rogues disappeared.

"Guess they've got their porridge," he declared. "And now if you two turtle-doves want to get married I don't know a better time. What do you say, Mr. Blossom?"

"Yes, yes! We must save all danger of any other scene like this!"

As may be imagined the lovers were not backward to consent. And in ten minutes they were made one in the law. They turned to Dick with faces beaming with gratitude.

"What can we ever do to repay your kindness?" exclaimed May.

"I told you once," cried Dick, gallantly, "I only take one pay from pretty girls."

"Yes, yes, I remember," cried the blushing bride. "And here it is, with interest."

She flung her arms around Dick's neck, and pressed a dozen warm kisses on his lips.

"Bless your sweet eyes, if you go on at that rate I'll have to open a bank account," he laughingly

exclaimed. "Never calculated on such compound interest."

Perhaps we may as well end our story here. As for the life of Dick, the Dakota Sport, it is but half told.

It may be said, indeed, that John Blossom did not forget the debt he owed him, and that he not only paid the full amount promised to Jake Trumper, but he made Dick easy about his hotel bill for some time to come.

There is no happier little nest in the Quaker City than that inhabited by the mated turtle-doves, Harry Earle and his dear little wife, and there is no face more welcome in that nest than the laughing visage of Dick, the Dakota Sport.

THE END.

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